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UNDER THE SETTING SUN

WE are indebted to a reader in Southern Rhodesia for the following very interesting letter and Press cutting:—

The Editor,
WEST.

Dear Sir,

Enclosed is a copy of Cattle Smuggling in S. Africa, which I hope will interest you.

The point I try to make clear is that your stories in WEST may not be absolute facts but are based on facts, facts that happen daily in parts of the world—even in my native Scotland, but no doubt, are doubted by many of your readers. I hope you will comment on the matter which no doubt would get WEST talked about and positively increase the circulation.

I am sorry I have not the full gift of imagination to write a story for WEST but hope to make an effort at a future date.

Yours faithfully,
H. H. W.

50,000 SMUGGLED CATTLE A YEAR

JOHANNESBURG "SUNDAY TIMES" CORRESPONDENT

Gaberones, Saturday.

A remand has been granted in the case of the alleged cattle smuggler who was arrested following the attack on a special constable on the Bechuanaland border.

The constable was set upon by nine young Europeans, alleged to be smugglers, and severely manhandled. He alleges that he was attempting to prevent a herd of cattle from being "put over" when this took place.

Although everything possible is being done by both the Union authorities and the Bechuanaland Administration, it will be appreciated that it is a gigantic task to patrol 500 miles of border successfully on foot; so the recent suggestion that a "flying squad" be formed is not so ridiculous as it would seem.

Bechuanaland has been experiencing a severe drought, more pronounced in the north than in the south. This puts the northern ranchers, men who have anything from 20 to 50 thousand morgen of ground and graze from 500 to 3,000 head of stock, in a difficult position. They must either sacrifice their stock for a ridiculously low figure to cattle buyers and traders from the southern portion of the territory, or employ a large staff of natives to skin the stock that die by the hundred daily. Obviously the lesser of two evils is to sell to the buyers.

These buyers are not in a position to accommodate unlimited numbers of cattle, and must dispose of them almost as soon as they arrive in the Southern Protectorate. Hence the smugglers from the Transvaal come over daily to pick up "snips" at bargain prices—£3 10s. to £5 for beasts that fetch £7 10s. to £10 on Union markets!

The Protectorate Administration controls, to a certain extent, the movements

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of all cattle within their own boundaries, but can they guess their ultimate destination and be in a position to tell the Union police exactly where they will cross the 500-mile border? It is a technical impossibility.

At the present moment cattle are very scarce in Bechuanaland. Where have they gone? On a recent tour through the ranches I found cattle very few and far between. They have all been sold to traders in the south, and traders in the south have very few head on hand.

Ranchers who at one time carried thousands of head have not a beast on their properties. One of the biggest concerns sold three thousand head of stock to one buyer in one batch.

Of course, there are exceptions. There are men who made preparations for just such an emergency and have been able to feed their stock through the drought. Now that it has rained they naturally do not entertain the idea of selling.

The *modus operandi* of the smuggler is somewhat as follows: He enters the territory on a passport and calls on one or two traders or farmers and gets some hundred head of stock. These are removed by the seller to a farm or reserve on or near the border. The smuggler returns home.

Then, after a day or two has elapsed, he comes back, under cover of darkness, and his cattle, kraaled, are handed over to him. With three or four European assistants who get £2 a night he edges them to the border fence. A man is left at the fence to watch patrols, and if he reports favourably the fence is loosened at the posts and pressed down while the cattle are driven over. They are rushed to a kraal and branded with a Union iron. No natives are used to drive—they are too apt to talk.

There is a certain type of smuggler, fortunately in the minority, who has no respect for other people's property. He buys his stock and drives it himself. He passes through the farms he encounters *en route* with a pair of pliers. Boundary fences do not stop him. Stock are missed at about the time he passes through the farms, but they are never found again.

Perhaps the most interesting item of all is the fact that the Union Government is the largest holder of smuggled stock. This is accounted for by the fact that the Administration has issued grants for the purchase of breeding stock on a five-year plan of repayment and consequently is, in a sense, the owner of the stock until such time as the Union farmer has paid for it. A lot of the stock so purchased on Government grants carries a Government brand and also a Protectorate one.

That is what the Union cattle breeder has to contend with, and that is why he cannot get a good price for his stock. He must compete with the smuggler and the 40,000 to 50,000 head that he imports annually.

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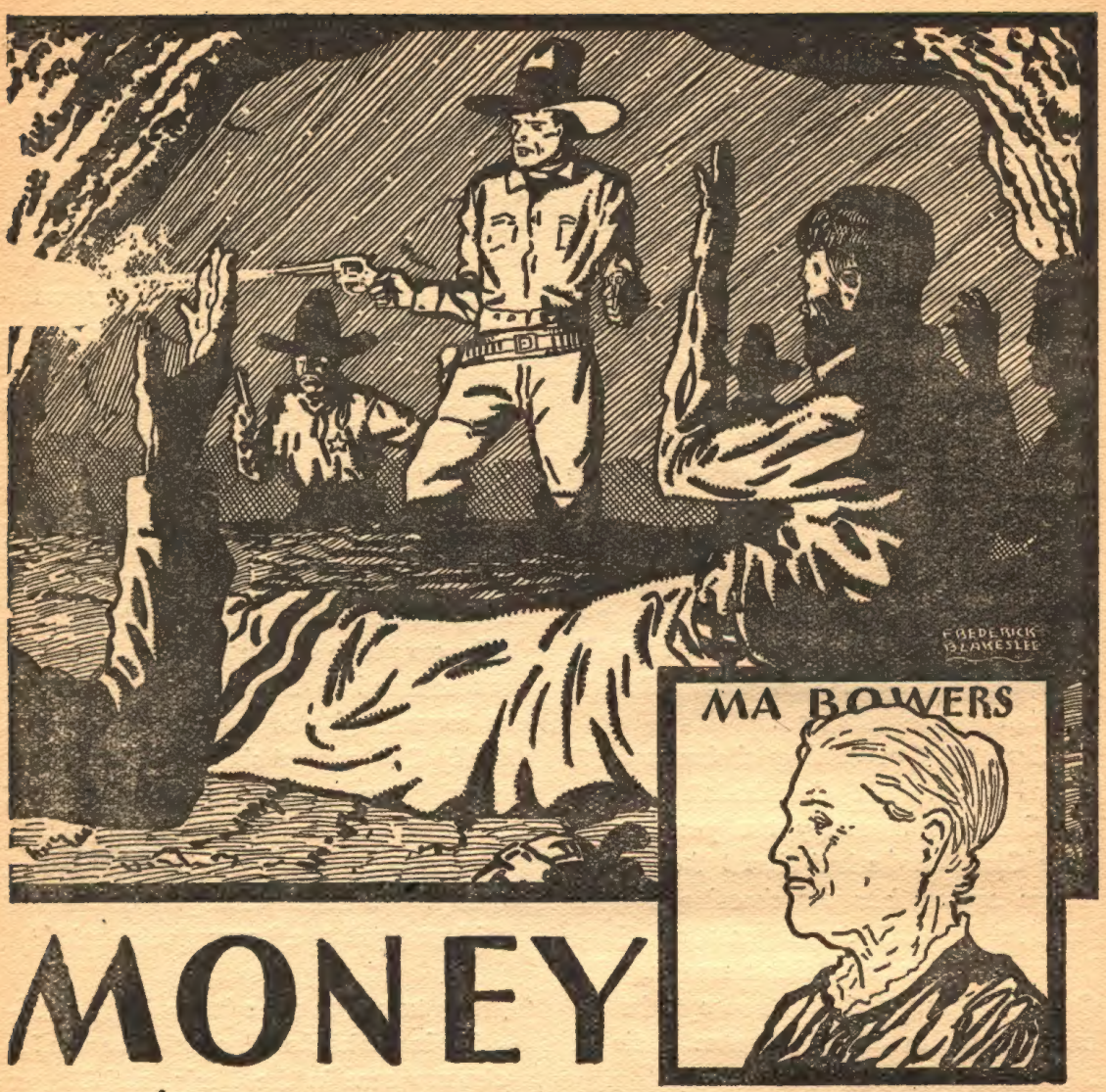
MAVERICK

It Was A Grisly Game They Played In Hell's Basin —Life For The Winner, And The Devil Take The Hindmost. Lass Winton Was Stacked Up Against As Cruel A Pack Of Killers As Hidden Valley Had Ever Seen, But Then He Started Blasting With His Six-Guns, And . . .

Lass Winton heard the shots that spelled a gunpowder message of life and death. Life to the winner, with the Devil tagging the hindmost for his cut of the take. Hell's Basin echoed the roars, which wavered to a thin ribbon of sound that seemed to pause above the brush-choked entrance to the Devil's Kitchen deep in the badlands.

A man was dying back there.

The tall cowboy knew it when he jumped his horse from the brush and sent him racing toward the hidden draw known as the Devil's Kitchen. Lass Winton, like most of the other denizens of Hell's Basin and environs, was on the dodge. His blue eyes were hard with the hunted look of men on the owl-hoot trail.



MONEY

by CHARLES M. MARTIN

He loosened the heavy .45 in the worn scabbard thonged low on his right leg. Old Colt Bowers of the C Bar B was back in Devil's Kitchen. Old Colt, and some of his enemies who wanted the little mountain spread for reasons of their own.

Curt Bowdie, maybe. Foreman of the powerful Sixes spread, who had signed the complaint that had made old Colt take to the badlands while Ma Bowers and his daughter Sally ran the C Bar B—who had also signed the murder complaint against Lass, young owner of the Flying W.

Catclaw and buckthorn tore at the heavy clothing of the cowboy as he spurred his horse through the mouth of the Kitchen. Row after row of sand-pitted lava rock made the bottle-necked wash look like a graveyard. Another rider was clattering through the rubble toward the lower end, too far for rifle range as Lass reached for the Winchester under his left leg.

His blue eyes narrowed as they swept the rows of stones, and then he was racing toward a flea-bitten sorrel off to one side. Old Colt's top string pony, standing with head lowered above a huddle on the ground. The cowboy swallowed hard when

he reined in and slid to the ground; bit his lips when he hunkered down beside the old raw-hider who smiled at him with forced cheerfulness.

"Colt, you old outlaw," Lass muttered huskily. "Was that Yuma Jones I saw high-tailin' it for the Basin?"

The old cattleman nodded weakly. Deep scratches showed on his rusty bullhides, and a bullet hole in his left breast. Trying to grin through the pain, but old Colt Bowers knew that his name was on that bullet. His name, and the date of his death.

"Yuma and Curt Bowdie," he whispered, and coughed until crimson foam beaded his thin white lips. "Bowdie called for showdown, but Yuma bought chips on an offside play before I seen him. Reckon you can get me home, son?"

"Home?" The cowboy choked up and turned away. Old Colt hadn't been to the C Bar B in nearly two years. Not since Curt Bowdie had signed the murder charge against him for shooting a Sixes puncher he had caught mauling Sally Bowers. But now it didn't matter. Old Colt was dying, and Lass swore under his breath that his old friend should die at home in his old oak bed.

"I'll put a plug in that hole to keep you from bleeding out," and he forced himself to smile. "You'll make it!"

Putting the old cattleman on the horse was easy for Lass Winton, who could rope and rassle down a bull yearling with the best of the high Arizona brush poppers. Old Colt stifled a groan and clutched the saddle horn with both gnarled hands. But he forced a smile when the two rode through a lane of pines where the scattered buildings of the C Bar B clustered in the shadow of the Catclaw mountains.

Two big dogs rushed out to meet them, barking a warning to the inmates in the ranch house. Sally Bowers and her mother came running out on the broad porch just as Lass caught old Colt and eased him to the ground. The cattleman's eyes were closed, and the young cowboy's voice was husky when he spoke to Ma Bowers.

"Fix his bed up, Ma. You, Sally, better get some hot water and bandages ready. Colt has been shot up pretty bad!"

The older woman clenched her work-roughened hands and hurried into the house to pull down the covers from the old bed in a side room. She turned to the cowboy after he laid old Colt carefully on the white sheet.

"Who done it, son?"

"Yuma Jones cut down on him," Lass muttered. "Pulled a sneak when Colt was facing Curt Bowdie. Better not tell Sally."

He caught his breath when a strong hand fastened to his shoulder and swung him around. Stared into the brown eyes of Sally Bowers, and shook his head when the girl began to rub the grip of her gun with her right hand.

"I'm going to get him," the girl breathed hoarsely. "I heard what you told Ma!"

"I heard yuh too," a new voice said.

They turned to see a lathy figure standing in the kitchen door. "We're due for a cleanup here in the Basin, and I'll get that varmint as shore as my name is Tombstone Perkins."

"You tailed me in," Lass accused. "You better light a shuck before the law comes snoopin' around the C Bar B."

Tombstone Perkins smiled with his pale green eyes. "What about yoreself?" he asked. "Happens the law is ridin' up the lane right now with a six-gun in his hand!"

"Go, both of you," Ma Bowers said, closing the front door. "You can slip out the back way."

Lass Winton shook his head stubbornly. "I'm through dodging," he answered quietly. "I'll wait for the sheriff. But first we got to fix up Colt."

Tombstone Perkins glided across the room and slid into the kitchen. Sally

brought hot water and clean rags, and the old cattleman opened his eyes when Ma Bowers began to bathe the wound.

"Leave it, Ma," he whispered. "Tell Jeff Saunders I want to talk to him right away!"

The sheriff entered without the formality of knocking. A heavy Colt .45 was gripped in his right hand, and his hard gray eyes scanned the little circle with a glance that missed no detail. The next moment he covered Lass Winton. His voice was rough when he spoke.

"Get them dew claws up, Lass. You make a pass for yore hardware and I'll salivate you shore as hell. Beggin' yore pardon, ladies."

The cowboy unbuckled his gunbelt and let it drop to the floor. "Like you say, Sheriff," he agreed quietly. "But right now Colt wants to talk to you."

"Took him long enough," the sheriff muttered, and holstered his gun. "Sally could have cleared him of that charge long since if he'd have let her do it."

"We don't use our women folks thataway," the cattleman growled. "It's about Lass Winton I want to talk."

"Don't you worry none about that cowboy," the sheriff answered. "He's wanted for murder, and I'll take him in to Sundown with me when I rides back. Been wantin' to come up with him for 'most a year."

"You won't," old Colt contradicted softly. "Jess Bowen was one of Bowdie's men, and I killed him myself. You all heard what I said!"

Lass stiffened. "You, old Colt?" he whispered hoarsely. "Jess Bowen was shot in the back with a 45-90 Winchester!"

"Like I've always carried," the cowman answered, and nodded his head emphatically. "He was aiming to cut down on you when you come ridin' through the Basin over there near yore Flying W spread, but I triggered first. Tombstone Perkins seen me do it."

The lanky outlaw appeared suddenly in the kitchen door with a gun in his hand. Covered the startled sheriff carelessly while his head bobbed on his scrawny neck.

"That's right," he corroborated. "Only me and Colt was both ridin' the owl-hoot trail, and couldn't come in to testify. Don't make no pass for yore Colts, Sher'ff. I don't aim to be took, but I'm backin' up what old Colt said. Make out a paper, gal, and I'll sign it. . . ."

Lass reached down for his gunbelt and strapped it around his lean hips. Fastened the tie-backs while the sheriff stared, but the old officer remained silent until the girl returned with paper and pen.

"Let me sign first." Colt Bowers reached for the pen.

"Better hold a gun on me, Lass," and the sheriff glared at Tombstone Perkins. "I'll get that long-laigged son one of these days shore as sin." But he winked solemnly at Winton.

The cowboy slid his gun loose and covered Saunders while Tombstone scrawled his signature. Tombstone passed the pen to Ma Bowers, and shifted his big feet toward the back door when Sally signed her name.

"So long, pard." Tombstone swallowed the Adam's apple in his long neck. "Guess I won't see you no more!"

Old Colt waved his hand weakly and sank back on the pillow. Sheriff Saunders stretched to his feet; reached out slowly and pushed Winton's gunhand aside. Shook his head slightly while he watched the old cattleman.

"Yo're free now, son," old Colt murmured without opening his eyes. "I'm askin' you to do me somethin'."

"Give it a name, ole pard." The cowboy's voice was trembly. "Just spell her out, ole feller!"

"Look out for Ma and Sally," the old

man whispered. "There's plenty maverick money back in the tangles where Bowdie and his crew don't pack the sand to ride. You'll do it for an ole pard, Lass?"

Lass slid to his knees and grabbed the extended hand. Gripped it firmly while his brown head nodded slowly. His voice was shaky when he reassured the cowman.

"You've been like a daddy to me, ole Colt," he muttered huskily. "Count it done, ole feller, 'cause I reckon I'll always love Ma for what she did for me!"

The old man smiled and opened his eyes. "Kiss me one more time, Ma," he whispered. "I'm just about to take the big trip!"

Ma Bowers bit her lips and tried to smile while her arms went around the old Texan she had loved for thirty long years. Then she kissed him gently and stroked his grizzled cheeks.

"Have a good trip, honey," she whispered bravely. "I'll be riding along after a while."

"Shore you will, Ma," he smiled. "I'm just ridin' on ahead to scout good bedground and water. I'll be waitin' out there for you when I get the new spread started. . . ."

He was smiling when he closed his eyes. Lass Winton chewed on his knuckles, and Ma Bowers lowered her head and began to sob. The sheriff stood up and put his arms around Sally, held the girl tightly while she sobbed stormily on his shoulder. Glared at the tall cowboy fiercely while his wind-roughened voice boomed:

"Yo're stayin' here on the C Bar B, cowboy. I heard you give yore spoken word to a dyin' man—one of the best we ever had up here in this Hell's Basin country. You hear me?"

"Heard you, Jeff," and Lass Winton turned his back while his square shoulders began to shake.

Ma Bowers came around the bed and put her arms around him. "I know how you loved old Colt too, son," she whispered. "Yo're the kind of a boy Colt and I always wanted. He would want you and me to be brave now, Lass."

"Yes'm," and the big cowboy took her in his arms and wiped his tear-stained face on her shoulder like a small boy. "I reckon I caught a cold sleepin' back in the brush last night."

The sheriff freed himself and blew his nose loudly. "You and me better be ridin' into Sundown," he said roughly. "We can stop at Jim Reed's and make arrangements for the burial. Just let me know can I do anything, Ma Bowers."

He whirled on his high heels and clanked out of the room. Lass patted Sally Bowers on the shoulder and held out his hand. Smiled crookedly when she glanced at him and gripped his fingers.

"We're pards now, Sally," he said gently. "It's up to you and me and old Misery Potts to build up our little spreads. Old Colt went out the way he always wanted to, but I'll square up with them that whipped him out of the herd."

The girl stiffened and gripped the handle of her gun. "I'll get Yuma Jones if I swing for it," she shouted and then burst into tears.

"It wouldn't be a fair shake," the cowboy whispered. "He might be the kind of a skunk that would draw against a woman, but if he didn't, they'd get you for murder. Gettin' Yuma Jones is a man's work, and I done promised old Colt. You hear me, Sally?"

The girl nodded. "I heard you, pard. But I aim to side you all the way down the river with a six-gun bucking in my hand."

Lass Winton nodded and reached for his hat. Took a last look at old Colt, and then kissed Ma Bowers on the cheek. Paused at the door when the sheriff called to him.

"Keep yore head up, Ma," he whispered. "I'll be back as soon as I make arrangements!"

CHAPTER II

Eat Crow or Draw!

Sundown was a cattle town, and saddle tramps and cattlemen stared curiously at the tall cowboy rubbing stirrups with Sheriff Jeff Saunders. The whole county knew that Lass Winton was wanted for the murder of Jess Bowen, Sixes puncher, who had been found back in the Catclaw with a 45-90 slug between his shoulders.

Curt Bowdie was ramrod of the big 666 spread that occupied most of Hell's Basin. The owners by inheritance lived back East, and the big foreman occupied the ranch house just a short ride from town.

The sheriff glanced sharply at the two horses tied in front of his office, spoke sharply to his companion. Both animals were branded 666 on the left shoulder; the tall bay was Curt Bowdie's horse.

"No gunplay now, Lass. I'm clearing you of that old murder charge, and you got to keep yore guns clean to help Ma Bowers and Sally."

The young cowboy nodded jerkily. His slitted blue eyes were like smoky flame, and his full lips were tightened in a straight line as he fought to control his anger. Yuma Jones, who had killed old Colt Bowers on a sneak, was waiting in the sheriff's office. . . .

"Yo're the law, Jeff," he muttered. "But have yore cutter ready when I come through the door. I don't trust either one of them hombres!"

Curt Bowdie got lazily to his feet when the sheriff entered the jail office. His neatly pressed gray trousers were tucked down into hand-made boots of soft polished leather. He wore a tailored flannel shirt and windsor tie, and he pushed back his forty-dollar Stetson with his left hand while he pointed to a "Wanted" poster with his right. Yuma Jones sprawled in a chair near the sheriff's desk.

"Saved yore office money, Jeff," and Bowdie's voice was boastful. "A murderer is gun bait for any man what crosses his trail, and you won't be bothered no more with old Colt Bowers. We cut his sign back in the Kitchen, and Yuma cut him down just when the old lobo was lining me under his sights."

He stopped speaking to stare at Yuma Jones who was crouching forward with hand poised above his gun. Swung his head slowly and took a deep breath when he saw Lass in the door frame. The Flying W cowboy was holding a six-gun in his right hand.

"You see him, sheriff," he whispered. "Wanted for murder, and a pard of old Colt Bowers!"

The sheriff smiled frostily and pointed a finger at Yuma Jones. "Let that killin' gun of yores rest in leather, Yuma," he growled hoarsely, and reached for a warrant in a pigeon hole of his old desk. "Lass Winton has been cleared of that murder charge, and I'm tearing up the paper again' him."

"I'm claiming that thousand dollar reward for old Colt Bowers," Yuma Jones grinned, showing broken yellow teeth. "Somebody has got to enforce the law, seein' as you was handicapped thataway. . . ."

"Blood money, eh?" The sheriff did not try to keep the sneer from his voice. "If yo're a bounty hunter, you can collect from yore boss. He's the one that posted the reward."

Yuma Jones glanced at Bowdie, who frowned with annoyance. "How come this Winton outlaw to be cleared?" he asked.

"Because yore hired killer shot a mite high," the young cowboy broke in coldly. "I heard the shots, and got there in time to carry old Colt home. He died in his own bed with his boots off!"

"Now you listen to me, Bowdie," the sheriff growled deep in his throat. "You've made enough trouble hereabouts. Old Colt done signed a confession that he killed Jess Bowen, and there are four witnesses, including myself. So don't go settin' that head-hunter of yores again' Winton unless he can take care of hisself!"

"You better use yore head, Sheriff." Bowdie's voice carried a warning. "Old Bowers had nothing to lose by confessing a killing he never done. Both him and Winton was long-riders, and now you've turned him loose among decent people again!"

"You meaning that personal?"

The sheriff stepped between the two men when Lass snapped the question savagely. Yuma Jones shifted his sneaky eyes restlessly; smiled when Winton pouched his gun. He made a sudden pass for his own holster, and a clubbed gun reached through the window behind him and thudded down on his bullet-shaped skull. A thin reedy voice cackled calmly behind the clubbed gun.

"Watch that slick-eared ramrod, boss. I got a surprise for you!"

Lass sidestepped the sheriff while his gun slid into his hand. Yuma Jones slumped to the floor with a little moan, and a tall rider stepped through the door with both hands held high. A little old cowboy stepped in behind him with a cocked gun boring into the newcomer's spine.

"Misery Potts! I thought I left you out on the Flying W?"

"That's what you done, Lass. Then I see you and Sheriff Saunders high-line for town, and while I was watchin', here comes this Shotgun Thompson out of the bresh. He slipped that sawed-off scatter-gun under his coat when he saw th' sheriff, forked his kak, an' lit a shuck right after you. So I bolted a hull on that lineback dun and come bilin' in to make it a party."

Suppressed excitement glowed in the old puncher's faded blue eyes. He jabbed Shotgun Thompson to the middle of the room on the end of his Colt, cackled sneeringly when he saw Curt Bowdie.

"Right there stands the king snake of this outfit," he shrilled. "Tryin' to glom both th' Flyin' W and the C Bar B spreads for his own use!"

"Stand hitched a spell, Misery," the sheriff interrupted. "Was it you buffaloed Yuma Jones through the window?"

"Right slap between th' hawns," the old puncher chuckled. "He was reachin' for his cutter to salivate the boss, just like he done when old Colt was augerin' with Curt Bowdie!"

"Bridle yore jaw, you spavined old jackass. I've took all th' slack I am to for one day!"

Curt Bowdie gripped his gun while he shouted at old Misery Potts. Lass Winton stepped forward and holstered his own gun. Eyed the Sixes foreman coldly for a moment before he spoke.

"Yo're due to take more," he said slowly. "Make a pass for yore iron, and I'm figgerin' you to be asking for showdown. Now you either draw or drop yore flippers!"

Curt Bowdie turned slowly and dropped his hands to his sides. Sheriff Saunders stood to one side watching Shotgun Thompson and Yuma Jones. Trouble that had festered for two years had come to a head within two minutes, and Jeff Saunders always rode out half way to meet trouble of any kind.

"Check," Bowdie grunted. "But since yo're so interested in the C Bar B, you can take word out to Ma Bowers that I'm takin' possession tomorrow."

The tall cowboy caught his breath sharply. "Yo're doin' which?" His voice was a whisper.

"Like I said," Bowdie repeated with a smile. "Ma Bowers borrowed two thousand from the bank about two years ago,

and I'm one of the directors. So I bought up her paper which came due today."

Lass reached down, and the sheriff stepped forward. "Steady, cowboy," he warned. "Looks like he done her all legal."

The cowboy smiled and hooked his hands in his gunbelt. "Ma told me about the note," he admitted. "Said there was two thousand due, and a hundred and forty interest. She figgered on askin' the bank for an extension."

"No can do," Bowdie grinned. "I figger them three sections of land is cheap at that price, and I'm taking over for my own string of holdings. I'm likewise takin' over the Flying W next month for the same reasons."

The young cowboy reached in the pocket of his chaps and pulled out a calf-leg roll of currency. Counted off the bills while Curt Bowdie stared at the money with eyes bulging from their sockets.

"Twenty-one hundred and forty," Winton said quietly. "Just produce that note and mark it paid in full. I reckon you don't want the C Bar B today, Bowdie. . . ."

"Keep yore money," Bowdie snarled. "Bein' an outlaw, there's no telling where you come by that dinero, and I'm closing on the C Bar B. You can't cut no rusty like that on Curt Bowdie!"

Lass Winton extended the money with his left hand. His right slapped down, jabbed a gun against the lean belly of the Sixes foreman. He punctuated his remarks with little jabs as he spoke through clenched teeth:

"Produce that note or get yore innards spilled all over the floor. You pull a shindy on Ma Bowers, and right then is when the Sixes is needin' some head-man help. Cough up, you dang polecat!"

Curt Bowdie flushed with anger and turned his eyes on the sheriff. "I demand protection," he blustered. "This jigger was an outlaw on the owl-hoot trail up to yesterday!"

"That was yesterday," the sheriff answered dryly. "The law says you got to have the papers on yore person when you makes a demand for payment. That note come due today, and you've been offered yore money. Now you better dig down and dig up before Winton signs a complaint again' you."

Curt Bowdie squirmed and reached to his hip pocket. Produced a flat wallet while he cursed under his breath, and walked to the sheriff's desk to receipt on the face of the note.

"Obtained under duress," he snarled. "And I demand to know where you got that money."

"Got it from Clay Horn, the cattle buyer," the cowboy answered quietly. "For

a jag of beef we done sold him yesterday."

"We? You didn't have enough beef on the Flying W to make a decent barbacue," Bowdie sneered. "He's a rustler, sheriff!"

The cowboy stiffened, and his tanned face turned white around his high cheekbones. Then he holstered his gun and faced Bowdie in a crouch. His voice crackled with anger when he spoke.

"Givin' you three," he gritted, "to either eat crow, or back up yore wau wau. The man don't live that can tell me I'm a rustler."

The Sixes foreman stepped back and hunched his shoulders. Brown eyes glittered from his dark skin like points of fire. Lass knew instantly that the big man was not afraid. Before either could get into action, Sheriff Saunders leaped between them with his hands spread wide.

"Hold yore fire! Either of you drags a gun, I'm takin' the winner shore as hell."

"Stand aside, Jeff," the young Flying W owner growled. "He called me a rustler!"

"I happen to know yo're wrong, Curt," the sheriff shouted. "Clay Horn bought them steers from old Colt Bowers and Lass Winton. Wild-eyed mossy-horns they busted and tied back in the tangles where yore men don't pack the sand to ride."

"My mistake," Bowdie rumbled. "But even if they did catch up them longhorns, they didn't stand a show of getting them out of the brush."

"I accepts yore apology this time," Lass answered dryly. "Yonder lays yore money, and how me and Colt get them out of the brush is our business, not yores."

"I'll see the inspector," Bowdie answered. "He won't clear that shipment if there's as much as one Sixes critter in the bunch."

"Getting them Sixes out is yore business," Lass retorted. "And I figger on paying off that note again the Flying W with the same kind of dinero. What you might call maverick money."

The Sixes foreman turned to Yuma Jones, who was trying to sit up. He jerked the gunman to his feet and slapped a hand away from the half-breed's holster when Jones reached for his gun. Shoved him to the door where he turned to glare at the Flying W owner.

"You'll hear from the Sixes," he warned. "C'mon, Shotgun!"

"Likewise, yo're like to hear from the Flyin' W," old Misery shouted shrilly. "Now that Lass is home again, things is goin' to be some different in Hell's Basin!"

CHAPTER III
Yuma Pulls His Gun

Lass Winton had recognized the promise in the hate-rimmed eyes of Yuma Jones. The gunman was a killer without scruples, and the tall cowboy despised him with that contempt the working waddy always feels toward those who wear the garb of the cow country without the ability to make a hand.

Shotgun Thompson was of the same breed. One of the two was always with Curt Bowdie to back up the demands of the Sixes foreman. Thompson had been a shotgun guard for a stage company, until he was discharged for drunkenness. Yuma Jones had been a guard at the state penitentiary until the superintendent had sent him packing for the same reason.

Lass Winton thought of these things while he stood in the shadow of Jim Reed's back room. Reed ran the general store, and prepared the dead for burial as a side line. A black covered wagon left the alley and started for the C Bar B with Reed in the driver's seat. Old Colt would be buried under the pines near the cold spring. The Flying W owner straightened his shoulders while his right hand loosened the gun on his leg.

"Stay behind me, Misery," he told the old cowpuncher. "Yuma Jones is headed

for the Dobe Dollar Bar, and I aim to keep him honest. You take the door and watch close for Shotgun Thompson if he tries to horn in with that scattergun he packs under his coat."

"Right behind you, boss," the old puncher chuckled happily. "I should have busted that hoss-backer wide open when I had the chance, but it ain't too late yet."

Lass shook his head slowly. "Give every man a chance, Misery. That's the way old Colt always played the game."

"And right now Colt is dead," Misery growled. "I rode for him till you left the C Bar B and started the Flying W. And I ain't forgetting that you took me along because I was all crippled up with the misery in my legs. So I ain't makin' no promises about that long-coupled Shotgun Thompson." He caressed the worn butt of his old frontier model Colt.

Lass caught the little old puncher by the shoulder and swung him around. "You do like I said," he demanded. "Curt Bowdie is going to be hard to beat, and you wouldn't be no help to me back there riding the owl-hoot trail like me and Colt had to do."

Misery Potts stared for a long moment while he tried to control his temper. Past fifty-five, with warped legs that had once fastened around the ribs of the worst bucking horses snared in the Catclaws. Bristling gray mustaches framing his thin lips; shapeless old Stetson shading fierce little eyes of faded blue. At last he waved a gnarled hand and nodded briefly.

"Yo're the ramrod," he clipped. "But the Flying W ain't going to pay off her note fighting them buzzards on the square. You mind what I tell you. . . ."

Lass sighed with relief. There was no diplomacy in old Misery. When he had trouble to face, he usually rode out to meet it a little better than half way. He made no secret about the five notches whittled on the handle of his gun. A man was either square or he wasn't, and the processes of the law were slow and often unsatisfactory.

"Stay by the door," the tall cowboy warned, and made his way up the alley.

Misery Potts stared resentfully and then grinned. Instead of following Winton, he turned on his heel and made his way back to the street. Stopped in front of the swinging doors of the Dobe Dollar, then shouldered through and placed his thin shoulders against the wall where he could look over the crowd.

He grinned mirthlessly when several men along the bar glanced up and retired to the back wall. Yuma Jones remained with a whiskey glass in his left hand, his .45 in the right. Curt Bowdie and Shotgun Thompson were not in sight, and Misery shrugged his shoulders while he pursed his thin lips and shot an amber stream toward the brass spittoon at the end of the bar. Ringed it center and wiped his lips with the back of his left hand.

"You lookin' for someone?" Yuma Jones holstered his gun while he sneered the question.

"Yeah, but I don't see him," Misery answered carelessly. "Tall skinny jigger about yore size, exceptin' he packs a sawed-off under his coat. Was you lookin' for somebody yore ownself?"

"I'm ridin' gun-sign on a owl-hoot rustler what don't pack the sand to take up for his pard," and Yuma Jones emptied the glass in his left hand.

"I take it yo're referrin' to that Sixes ramrod," Misery chuckled dryly. "Seein' that he didn't make much of a stab at helpin' you back there in the jail office."

Yuma Jones passed his glass to the bar and stepped back slowly. His greenish eyes were slitted and deadly when he crouched low with right hand shadowing his gun. The bartender leaned back and bit his lip, but Misery continued to smile.

"It was you what buffaloed me through that window," Yuma Jones accused hoarsely, "to save that rustlin' boss of yores—or right now he'd be with old Colt Bowers!"

"Yeah, I busted you," Misery admitted quietly. "Only I should have shot you in the back like you figgered to do Lass Winton. . . ."

Yuma Jones started for his gun. Stopped suddenly when he saw the warning look in Misery's eyes. The old cowboy was still smiling while he stared at a point behind the killer, and Yuma Jones stiffened and glanced in the mirror of the back bar. Then he turned slowly to face the Flying W owner who had eased in through the side door.

"Pulled another sneak, eh?" he sneered, and shifted his feet to throw his right leg forward under his hand. "Can't get over them habits you learned back there on the owl-hoot trail."

"That's right," Lass agreed softly. "Back there you got to watch yoreself for fear some head-huntin' skunk will shoot you in the back to collect bounty. Nohow, I've finished what I come to town for, and I ain't ridin' away from the law no more."

Yuma Jones nodded his head slowly. "Might have knowed you wouldn't come in the front door," he smirked. "Might have knowed that ole spavin yonder was only a bait."

Misery Potts started to growl, but relaxed. He was watching the face of his young boss and he seemed satisfied with what he found. The blue eyes were now kindled with smoky flame between slitted lids that never winked.

Lass Winton seemed carved out of stone as he stared at the crouching man. Deep lines were etched around the corners of his mouth and around his eyes to make him look older than his twenty-four years. When he spoke, his voice was low and harsh like the grating of metal.

"Yo're said to be fast with a cutter, Yuma Jones. Next to Curt Bowdie, you're said to be the fastest gun-slick in Arizona."

The gunman grinned like a wolf. "Old Colt Bowers has been talkin' with his mouth," he sneered.

The young Flying W head continued to stare, but now the lines around his mouth tightened until his lips showed white. He shook his head slightly before he answered.

"Yeah, I was talking to old Colt. He told me how fast you was and what a square shooter you are. Told me that he was talkin' to Curt Bowdie, when you horned in with an off-side play to smoke him down. Yeah, old Colt told me them things before he died. . . ."

"Worth a thousand dollars, that old He," the gunman chuckled. "That's the highest price I ever got for a lobo scalp, and the boss pays off tomorrow."

Lass controlled his rising anger. Anger always slowed down a man's hand, and the memory of the outlaw trails was too fresh in his mind. He had passed his word to look after the two women on the C Bar B, and if he asked for showdown with the killer, the law might. . . .

"I'll see you later, Yuma," he said slowly. "Right now I got other things to look after."

"Stand hitched, you sneakin' yeller belly! I served notice on you back in the sheriff's office, and you ain't goin' to dog out on me now."

Old Misery Potts stared at Lass as though he could not believe his ears. His old hand started down for the gun on his leg when Yuma Jones started to talk. Stopped abruptly when he saw the leaping flames in the blue eyes of his young boss. He had known the cowboy ever since he was a button; had never thought him to eat crow for any man.

"I don't want any trouble, Jones." The Flying W owner made his voice sound like a plea for peace. "We're puttin' old Colt

away tomorrow, and he was my pard . . ."

"Yeah, he was yore pard, but you don't pack the sand to take up for him. I cut him down. Me, Yuma Jones—and you come sneakin' in lookin' for a chance to plug me in the back!"

He left the bar and walked toward the tall cowboy with his hand on his gun. Reached out with his left hand and slapped Winton full in the mouth.

"I'm goin' to kill you for what you done to me and Curt this afternoon," he growled, and stepped back to his place at the bar. "Draw, you mangy coyote!"

The expression on Lass Winton's face never changed. Misery Potts groaned while his hand rubbed the grip of his gun, but something held him in check. Something that he saw in the cold blue eyes of his young boss.

"Don't kill me, Jones," he heard Lass whisper. "That would be murder."

"Murder?" Yuma Jones laughed mirthlessly. "There's witnesses enough here for the both of us. Draw, you sneakin' rustler!"

The young cowboy shook himself and straightened up. White spots stood out on his high cheek-bones, and his voice rose in volume when he started to speak.

"That's enough, Jones," he snapped. "You admitted you killed old Colt, and you told all those fellers you was going to kill me. I come in here peaceful, and find you drawing on old Misery Potts. But the man don't live what can call me a rustler!"

Yuma Jones stared and slapped down for his gun. Lass waited until the long barrel started to slip from leather. Then he flicked his right hand down and buckled his knees at the same time. Flame throated out from the muzzle of his gun when his buckling knees dropped the holster free, and he thumbed the hammer again to echo the roar of his first shot.

Yuma Jones jerked back and doubled over. Dropped his gun before the muzzle had tilted up. Slumped back on his haunches with both hands gripping his stomach while Lass Winton caught the bucking gun in his hand and pouched it smoking.

"You'll live an hour, mebbe two," the cowboy said. "And you was the fastest gun-slinger in Arizona outside of yore boss. You reckon he'll take up for you?"

"Lemme get my gun," Yuma Jones reached out for his .45. "You got me through the belly, and I don't aim to suffer!"

The cowboy stepped forward and kicked the gun aside. "You'll suffer like you made old Colt suffer," he said harshly. "And like you pointed out, there's plenty witnesses to prove I shot in self defense!"

"Whiskey," the wounded man begged. "And I got to see Curt before I cash!"

"I'll give him yore message," the cowboy answered. "Spell her out, feller. . . ."

"Get them hands up, Winton. I'll take it myself!"

Lass straightened to face Curt Bowdie standing in the doorway. Shotgun Thompson lowered the hammers of the sawed-off cocked and ready in his hands. But the voice of old Misery Potts cackled derisively.

"Hands up, you two shorthorns. Ease them hammers down gentle-like before I does you a meanness, Shotgun!"

The two Sixes men stiffened. The foreman slowly raised his hands while Thompson lowered the hammers of the murderous weapon. After which Bowdie came slowly forward and stopped near Yuma Jones.

"What was the message, Yuma?" His deep voice expressed nothing but curiosity.

Yuma Jones gripped his lean belly with both hands.

"You can't cut her, Curt," he gasped. "He's got you shaded on the draw!"

Curt Bowdie shrugged and turned to Winton. "That there's murder," he said

quietly. "Right now yo're ridin' the owl-hoot trail again, only you ain't got savvy enough to see it."

Lass Wilton smiled. "Yo're forgettin' what the sheriff told you back there in his office," he reminded softly. "Not to cut my sign unless you was shore you could handle yore own end. Yuma will tell you his ownself that he drawed first."

Yuma Jones nodded weakly. His greenish eyes were beginning to glaze, and the pool under his legs was spreading out over the floor to soak the dirty sawdust.

"That's what I wanted to tell you, Curt," he mumbled. "I had my hogleg out before he started to draw. He's got you shaded, but you know what to do. All I'm askin' is for you and Shotgun to pick up for a pard." He allowed his body to drop back to the floor.

Curt Bowdie stared for a moment while the crowd waited. Misery Potts prodded Shotgun Thompson between the shoulders when the tall gunnie twitched his left arm. And then the Sixes ramrod shrugged carelessly.

"Pack him down to Jim Reed's place," he said to the bartender, and turned to Winton. "I'll see you later, feller!"

Misery Potts shook his head while he watched the two men stomp out and mount their horses. Not until then did he pouch his gun. His cackling voice was dubious when he followed Lass Winton through the side door.

"I should have plugged that Shotgun feller," he complained. "But yo're the boss. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

Tombstone Makes a Hand

Lass Winton rode across a narrow bench with Sally Bowers rubbing stirrups on his left. The girl glanced at the two coiled ropes hanging from his saddle horn. Turned her eyes to his tanned face and studied him intently for a moment.

"I can remember when dad nicknamed you Lass," she said, breaking a silence that had lasted for ten minutes. "You was just a button then, carrying wood for the cookie, but you were always playing with a rope."

"Yeah," he rumbled. "Seems like I was born with a lass rope in my hand. We're goin' to need 'em back there in the brush when them catch dogs commences to chouse a steer through the tangles."

Neither mentioned the funeral under the pine trees the afternoon before. Both had remained dry-eyed during the brief ceremony when the tall cowboy stood at the head of the grave with his arms around Ma Bowers.

"I'm sorry you had to kill a man," the girl continued. "But Yuma Jones had a killing coming. I just wanted to say thanks, pard."

Lass did not smile. He shrugged slightly and nodded his head. Rubbed the handle of his gun with a calloused palm.

"Yeah, he had it coming. I figgered it was either him or me, so I took it to him. Even begged him not to kill me. . . ."

"Misery Potts was telling us about it," the girl answered. "Misery said you had trouble with Curt Bowdie. You must be careful, Lass."

"Me be careful?" The cowboy became instantly serious. "It's you and Ma who will have to be careful now, Sally. Bowdie is playing some kind of a game to build a spread of his own here in the Basin. He had it all fixed to grab the C Bar B, and figgered that you went with the spread like the live stock. Be best for you to carry a gun on yore leg wherever you go."

The cowboy pointed to a brush patch where the dogs were barking. Reached for one of his ropes and built a horn-size loop while he kneed his roping horse to the edge of the clearing.

"Them catch dogs is heelin' a critter out of the tangles," he told the girl. "We got to take him head and heels when he busts

through, so you stretch out his hind legs."

Sally Bowers nodded and shook out her loop. Dressed like any other working cowboy in Levis and heavy woolen shirt, with thorn-scarred bullhides to protect her legs in the heavy brush. Double-rigged kak for mountain roping where a waddy took his dallies in case he had to tie loose from his catch if the beast circled a tree.

The brush was so high that they could not see the steer. But they could hear the three dogs driving him toward the clearing, and Lass shouted a low warning when the cracking became louder. Then an Airdale raced into the open with a thousand pounds of spotted steer charging him with lowered head.

The other two dogs were nipping at the big brute's heels to keep him coming. The cowboy started his horse and whirled his rope once. The loop shot from his hand in a snaky arc and dropped over the brush-polished horns. His practised hands made a dolly welter around the saddle horn, and his horse sat down at just the right time to snap the steer around at the end of the rope.

Sally heeled her horse and came up from behind. Slapped her twine down hard on the ground behind the kicking heels. Took her dallies and stretched out facing the cowboy with the steer between them. The roped animal jumped and went down just as Winton left the saddle with hands reaching for the piggin' string around his waist. His brown hands flashed without a miss when he made his turns to hog-tie three legs, and he threw off both ropes before the startled steer found breath enough to bawl.

"Nice ropin', pard," he said to the girl. "Light down and help me neck this critter to a sapling. We snub him low, and after he fights that tree for a day or so, we can handle him better."

The girl dismounted and anchored her horse with trailing reins. Sat on the threshing head while Lass Winton rope-haltered the big steer with a hard knot and tied off low-down to a stunted tree. The girl looked the animal over carefully.

"Maverick," she shouted happily. "You going to burn him, Lass?"

The cowboy shook his head. "Old Misery will follow up with the irons after a while," he explained. "That's his part of the job until we get enough in the holding pens. Yonder he comes now with old Pete."

Misery Potts rode into the clearing on a gentle old gelding, leading a big ox on the end of his rope. He waved his hand while he swung down and threw a Flying W iron on the ground. The dogs were back in the brakes after another steer, but the old cowboy gathered chips and built a fire in a little hollow.

"Hoss-back!"

Lass Winton jumped his saddle as he shouted at the girl, and reached for his tight-twist while his sorrel wheeled toward the crackling brush. The girl saw a big red steer coming through the tangle as she swung aboard, but the cowboy spurred forward and made his throw before she got to her rope.

Now she understood why the other cowboys called him Lass. His hands anchored the tie-fast and reached for his second rope while the steer was still high-tailing. The smart sorrel sat down at just the right time to "bust" the steer for a hoolihan, and then the cowboy was on the ground with his second loop snaking out toward the twitching heels.

He caught both hind legs and hip-leaned to make his stretch, and then walked around a stunted pine to take a turn with a slip-knot. Misery Potts grunted and turned back to his fire, and the girl bit her lip and slid from the saddle with a hoggin' string in her strong hands.

"Sorry, Lass," she muttered, and straddled the steer to tie off three legs. Two turns and a half-hitch while the cowboy

watched critically, and she flushed with pleasure when he praised her work.

"Nice work, pard. Now I got to call them catch dogs before they work us and the hosses to death."

A high shrill whistle keened out from his lips to stop the tracking dogs. They came through the brush with tongues lolling and grins on their whiskered faces. The cowboy praised each one in turn; slapped them roughly with affectionate hands while the girl threw off the ropes.

She watched with silent admiration while he eased the cinches and talked softly to the horses. Even the patient old ox came in for his share of petting while he slupped his big tongue out to clear the dust from his flaring nostrils.

Suddenly the young cowboy whirled on his heel and slid into the brush, his right hand slapping down for his gun.

"Hold yore fire, cowboy," a plaintive voice droned through the brush. "It's only old Tombstone come to give you the lend of a hand."

Lass stepped out of the brush with a grin covering his sweating face. Tombstone Perkins glided from behind a lava rock like a shadow, with Winchester muzzle down in the crook of his right arm.

"Yo're like to get yoreself shot skulkin' around thataway," the cowboy reproved quietly, "after what that Sixes ramrod promised me."

Tombstone smiled and shrugged his stooped shoulders. "Not with all that racket you all was kickin' up," he retorted dryly. "So I figgered it was about time I was payin you and Ma Bowers for all th' grub and fixin's I've been gettin' th' last two-three years."

"Forget it. Yo're ridin' the owl-hoot trail for stealin' a hoss Curt Bowdie like to have killed. Even Sheriff Jeff Saunders knows that."

Tombstone shook his head soberly, "Yeah, but that makes me out a hoss thief just the same. They hangs hoss thieves in Arizony if they catches them."

"About makin' a hand," the cowboy answered. "You figger to help Misery burn and yoke them steers?"

"I don't need no help!" Misery Potts glared at the tall outlaw. "Besides which, that lanky jigger never made a hand even before he went in for rustlin' hosses. He's too dang lazy to work, and he eats like he never did find bottom to his stummick."

"I'm only forty-two, and I believe in savin' my strength," Tombstone answered lazily. "What I'm figgerin' on is guardin' this workin' layout while you jiggers is poppin' the brush."

Lass Winton became thoughtful. "There might be something in what he says, Misery. The Sixes carries about fifteen hands on the payroll, and we need about fifty steers to pay off that note against the Flying W inside a month."

"Which means yo're goin' to be plenty busy doin' it," Tombstone reminded. "What if Bowdie sent some riders over to shoot some of his own mossy-horns for fresh beef? And maybe they'd get careless and slap a slug into you or ole Misery, spavined and wore-out as he is?"

Misery Potts turned his irons and straightened up slowly. "You start hoorawin' me, they's going to be one less longrider sneakin' around in these badlands," he warned shrilly. "You double-jinted, wall-eyed jughead!"

Tombstone grinned lazily. "You ever see me throw a knife?" he asked carelessly.

Misery reached for his gun with a frown on his wrinkled face. "You ever start throwin' a knife at me, I'll dot yore eyes shore as hell," he promised grimly. "Beggin' yore pardon, Sally."

"If I ever wanted to throw a knife at you, you'd be dead before you found it out," Tombstone glared at the little old puncher. "I done throw my knife one time this morning, and you just kept shag-

gin' through the brush without knowin' that Snag Wilson had you under the sights of his long gun, with his finger pullin' back on the trigger. . . ."

Misery Potts stared without speaking. Sally Bowers and Lass Winton glanced at each other and turned to Tombstone. The lanky outlaw hunkered down on his worn heels and pitched a thin-bladed knife into the dirt with little twitches of his supple wrist.

"Tombstone," the Flying W owner said in a serious voice, "you tryin' to tell us that you knifed Snag Wilson of the Three Sixes?"

Tombstone nodded carelessly and kept on pitching his blade. He made it turn two times and then three, as the point hit the soft dirt. Back-handed and forward, sideways and double flips, with the point always sticking in the ground.

"Had to do it," he grunted. "He was about two hundred yards from ole Misery with his Winchester gettin' ready to smoke. So I tossed this one clear through his shoulder blades and split his treacherous pip."

Misery Potts laid down his branding irons and came slowly across the clearing, limping with rheumatism as he came. Stuck out a grimy hand and gripped the outlaw's. His voice was shrill with excitement when he spoke:

" 'Bliged to you, yuh slab-side old long-rider. Likewise I'm takin' back most of them things I said about you."

"Most of 'em is true." Tombstone grinned as he shook hands. "But I figgered to make a hand and scout for this outfit while yo're workin' the brush. Just cut me in for a dollar a head for grub."

"Yo're hired." Lass also stuck out his hand. "And I want you to keep yore eye on Ma Bowers and the C Bar B when you ain't too busy. Now you better get out of sight before someone comes prowling around."

"They might at that," Tombstone grinned. "I tied that jigger on his hoss and headed him back toward the Sixes. Watch yoreself, fellers." With that, the outlaw slid back into the brush.

Misery Potts picked up a cherry-hot iron and burned the Flying W on the left hip. Then he did the same to the big red steer and kicked his fire apart. Sally Bowers watched while he led the big ox close to the steer and removed a heavy yoke.

The old cowboy fastened the timber across the forehead and tightened his bolts; spoke softly to the patient ox and waited until old Pete lowered his head. Then he slipped a bolt through a hole in the heavy horns and fastened the yoke in place. Cast off the hoggin' string and jumped away when the steer scrambled to his feet.

"Will old Pete take that steer on down to the corrals?" Sally showed doubt in her pretty tanned face.

"He won't ever miss," old Misery grunted. "Them ox is grain fed, and they gets their grain down yonder at the holdin' pens. Tall grass don't mean a thing to them critters."

"So that's how you and dad rounded up enough steers to pay off the note on the C Bar B," the girl murmured. "Back here in these tangles where a horse can't work his way through, and where you couldn't make a catch if he did."

"That's maverick money," the cowboy agreed. "Now we better start these catch dogs workin' again."

He walked over to tighten his cinches. "Yah!" he shouted at the three dogs. "Go get 'em, fellers!"

CHAPTER V

A Visit from the Sheriff

Like many of the other small cattle spreads in the high Arizona mountains, the C Bar B made use of natural corrals provided by the lay of the country. Nestling right at the edge of the

badlands, old Colt Bowers had thrown bars up at the entrance of several blind canyons.

These were now being used by old Misery Potts to hold the wild steers as the patient ox dragged them down from the inaccessible brush tangles. All he had to do was feed the big beast its grain at one of the canyons.

"Them ox never misses a meal," he explained. "When we get to working farther back in the brush, it might take them a little longer, but they always bring the steers in."

"We got seven today," the girl answered with a tired smile. "But I had no idea that brush-popping was such hard work."

"You'll harden to it," he told her. "If those mavericks were easy to get out, Curt Bowdie would have a crew working in there for himself. Looky yonder up the lane!"

He reined his horse into the brush and held out his hand for the girl to follow suit. Two riders were just coming up the long lane toward the C Bar B.

"It's Sheriff Saunders," the girl whispered. "Sheriff Saunders and Curt Bowdie."

Lass eased the gun in his scabbard and swung to the left. "I want to hear what that Sixes ramrod has to say, and we can do it from behind the house. Light down and kick yore spurs loose, Sally."

They dismounted in back of the saddle room. Unbuckled their jangling spurs and cat-footed across the yard to the back of the long adobe building. Their boots made no noise on the dusty caliche, and they slipped along the side of the building as Ma Bowers went to the front of the house.

"Howdy, Sheriff," they heard her salute Saunders in her deep throaty voice. "Light down and cool yore saddle. Mister Bowdie can stay hoss-back if it's all the same to him."

"Howdy, Ma Bowers," the sheriff answered, his voice gruff. "We come ridin' to see about a killin'."

There was a long pause, and then the deep voice of Ma Bowers answered. "Don't say it, Jeff. Don't tell me something has happened to Lass Winton. He's all we have now since old Colt. . . ."

"You won't have him long!" The voice of Curt Bowdie was savage. "He done killed one of my men; either him or that old rawhide who shadows him close."

Ma Bowers sighed with relief. "Neither one of them two is riding the owl-hoot," she answered sharply. "And both of them is capable of taking care of themselves. Git it told, Curt Bowdie!"

"Snag Wilson was knifed in the back," the sheriff explained. "His hoss came back to the Sixes with Snag tied ankle and wrist to the saddle. He was dead for all of four hours."

"That's more than the Sixes do for a man when they shoot him in the back," Ma Bowers snapped. "They leave him where he falls, and high-tails it for cover. All I got to say is that it's a shame Shotgun Thompson wasn't on that job."

"I'll take care of Shotgun if he runs a blazer," the sheriff grunted. "But we followed sign and back-tracked Snag's horse over here toward C Bar B range. Whereat's Misery Potts?"

"Back feedin' the day's catch," Ma Bowers answered. "But Misery ain't worth shucks at pitching a knife."

"Seen his tracks all over the place where Wilson was killed," the sheriff answered. "Reckon I'll have to talk to him, Ma."

Curt Bowdie slapped for his gun when Lass Winton stepped around the corner of the building. Sheriff Saunders shouted and reined his horse between the two men.

"Let that gun ride, Bowdie! I'm packin' the law up here in this country."

Bowdie scowled and loosened his fingers. The Flying W owner grinned and kept on coming. Sally sided her mother, but her strong fingers were wrapped around the

handle of her gun while she glared at the Sixes foreman.

"Let him clear leather if he feels lucky, Sheriff." Lass watched Bowdie hopefully. "He's on C Bar B land, but his hoss will pack him back to the Sixes if he gets his hackles up."

"Like you did for Snag Wilson, eh?" Bowdie sneered. "You hear that admission, Jeff?"

The sheriff stared at the young cowboy and scratched his head. "What you know about that killin'?" he asked slowly.

"What killin'?"

The sheriff shrugged impatiently. "You was back there listening," he grunted. "I saw yore shadow around the corner."

"Outlaws got Snag," he answered carelessly. "Hell's Basin is full of 'em."

Bowdie ground his teeth. "Time we was havin' a cleanup back there," he shouted. "Decent men can't ride across that strip of hell, but them that rode th' owl-hoot trail is safer than money in the bank."

" 'Pears like," Lass agreed quietly. "So if I was rodding the Sixes, I'd tell my men to stay on their own range. Either that or quit bellyachin' when they got their needin's."

"You watch yore step, young feller," the sheriff warned. "I've been thinkin' about cleanin' out Hell's Basin and the Devil's Kitchen for quite some time. Might do it yet."

"I'll lend you every man on the Three Sixes," Bowdie offered eagerly. "Deputize 'em and we'll have them long-riders inside of a week."

The sheriff stared at him coldly. "I can get up my own posse when I need one," he snapped. "You Sixes fellers don't always hit where you aim."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' just what I said. Every man has the right to protect himself, and I ain't forgettin' what you tried to pull down at my office."

"You ain't fooling anybody, Curt Bowdie," Sally Bowers interrupted. "You know Lass Winton has you beat if he can work the brakes for the money he owes on his note. You also know he couldn't do any work back there if all your men was chousin' through the brush with stars on their vests, and Winchesters in their hands."

The big foreman stared at the girl with hell in his gray eyes. "You and yore Ma will come beggin' some day," he promised hotly. "I used to set quite a store by you till you taken up with that long-rider yonder."

The tall cowboy stiffened and stepped forward. "You spoke out of turn twice, Bowdie. Law or no law, you do it one more time and you answer to me!"

"Yeah," the sheriff growled. "And next time you better do it when the law ain't around. The gal don't want no part of you, and Lass Winton never was no outlaw by rights."

Bowdie shrugged his square shoulders with a grin, pointed to the barred opening of a blind draw where Misery Potts was forking blue-stem over the gate.

"There's yore man, Sheriff," he drawled, "do yore duty."

Saunders glared at him and started for the rocky corral. Lass shied off and kept pace with the two women right behind him. Curt Bowdie lifted his horse to a lope and slapped for his gun. The deep drawling voice of the Flying W cowboy pulled him to a stop as he caught the flash of metal in the dying sun.

"Rein in, feller. You try to cut a rusty on the C Bar B and I'll empty yore saddle sure as hell. Like Jeff Saunders told you, he's the law up here in Hell's Basin."

The Sixes foreman reined in with a muttered curse as he stared into the cowboy's gun. "That's twice you've drawed on me," he growled. "The third time there's goin' to be smoke."

The younger man pouched his six-gun

and balanced himself on his high heels. "I'm callin' you right now," and his blue eyes were smoky with anger. "Slap leather, you ringy lobo!"

"Stand hitched, the both of you. First man reaches is goin' to smell law-smoke. Ease off there, Bowdie. You, Lass Winton. String out there and ride point before I takes a hand!"

Both men swiveled their eyes to the gun in the sheriff's right hand. Bowdie sneered and turned his horse. Lass curled the corners of his mouth and lined out for the corral, riding point as the law had ordered.

Misery Potts threw down his fork and hooked the gnarled fingers of his right hand into his gunbelt when he saw the Sixes foreman. Never a word did he speak, but his faded eyes were slitted and watchful while the little group bore down on him. He growled deep in his throat when the sheriff spoke sharply.

"Onclutch that smoke pole, Misery. I want a few words with you about a killin' which happened this morning."

"Killin'?" The old cowboy lifted his shaggy brows in surprise. "My gun ain't been fired recent."

"How about that skinnin' knife on yore belt?" Bowdie pointed with his left hand.

Old Misery nodded his head slowly. "I savvy," he answered and broke into a cackling laugh. "You mean Snag Wilson what got a blade between the shoulders just about the time he was linin' his 45-90 down on my back when I was takin' an ox through the timber."

Sheriff Saunders turned his eyes on the ramrod of the 666 spread. "You didn't say nothin' about that," he accused grimly. "Now mebbe you can explain what Snag Wilson was doin' so far from the Sixes range?"

"I sent him out after camp meat," Bowdie answered. "We got a lot of critters chousin' back there through the tangles, and the cookie wanted fresh beef for the table. That's government land back there, like you knows."

"Yeah, it is," Misery agreed quietly. "But if you was a right good tracker, you would have found where Snag bled out on C Bar B range. Same bein' boughten land, and paid for. That right, Shur'ff?"

"It was C Bar B range," Jeff Saunders admitted and then his hand slapped down to cover the old puncher. "But murder is killin' no matter where it is done. Now you speak up, you ole mossy-horn!"

"Turn that iron away," Misery complained. "How could I knife that bush-whacker, and me with an ox on the end of my twine? I was takin' him in to yoke a critter that Lass and the gal had just stretched out. Ain't that right, boss?"

"Right as rain," and the cowboy smiled at Curt Bowdie. "And we'll have enough steers to pay you off before that note comes due. In the meantime, you and yores keep off of both C Bar B and Flying W range, or else you can take what Snag Wilson collected."

"Don't you go for to speak so big, young feller," the sheriff interrupted. "I'll ride up here any time a killin' takes place in my jurisdiction. Reckon I'll have to take you back to Sundown, Misery."

The old cowboy glowered a moment and then reached slowly to the left side of his belt. Drew his skinning knife carefully and handed it to the sheriff.

"You see any fresh blood on that *cuchillo?*" he snarled. "Look her over careful, Johnny Law, because you ain't cuttin' no windy on old Misery Potts."

His right hand popped leather and drew while the sheriff was reaching for the knife. The old cowboy backed off and covered both Bowdie and the sheriff, and his cracked voice was shrill when he sounded his warwhoop.

"That buzzard has made outlaws of every man back there in the Devil's Kitchen. And Gawd help him and his rustlin' bush-whackin' crew if he puts me on the

owl-hoot trail. What you say, Jeff Saunders?"

"Better put up that hog-leg and surrender peaceful," the sheriff warned. "I rode roundup with you many the time before I started sheriffin', and you ain't never knowed me to eat crow. Put up that iron, Misery Potts, before I match my draw again yore drop."

"Hold it!" There was danger in the old cowboy's voice. "Likewise you never saw me dog it up to now, and I'll smoke shore as hell if you reach for yore belt. I don't aim to be took for somethin' I never done."

CHAPTER VI
Dead Man's Note

Sheriff Saunders dropped the knife and drew a deep breath. "It's a showdown, Misery," he almost whispered, but his bronzed face was hard. "Yo're callin' an old pard for showdown."

"Don't draw, Jeff," Misery pleaded. "I'll drop you shore as sin. Don't force my lead, Jeff."

Curt Bowdie grinned to show even white teeth. "Take him, Jeff," he goaded, "and right then is when I'll take up for you and knock him kickin'!"

"You won't," Lass Winton interrupted. "You make a pass for yore iron, I'll slap you from that hull before yore finger presses trigger. And I won't throw off my shots like Yuma Jones done."

Sally Bowers drew her gun and faced the Sixes ramrod. Old Misery held the drop while his eyes pleaded with his old saddle pard. Bowdie and Lass glared at each other, waiting for the move that would litter the C Bar B with dead and wounded. And then a snarling voice broke the tension. The nasty voice of Shotgun Thompson.

"Stand hitched, you C Bar B rustlers. I got you under my scattergun, with both triggers ready to drop!"

"Ease 'em down gentle before I blow a hole through yore back, Shotgun." The plaintive voice of Tombstone Perkins stopped Misery Potts just as he was about to drop his gun.

Shotgun Thompson was standing from an upright lava slab with his sawed-off cradled against his hip. A tall shadow slanted out from behind him, and the gunman lowered the double hammers. Tombstone shoved him in the open and followed with an old .44 jabbing his prisoner's back.

"Now you pull that buckle and shuck that killer gun before I smoke you down." Tombstone's voice was cold and savage. "I seen you sneakin' up there through th' lavas, and I'm watchin' out for Ma Bowers and her gal. Jerk that scattergun loose, you dang lobo!"

Shotgun Thompson unbuckled and dropped the vicious sawed-off to the ground. Sheriff Saunders nodded his head while a gleam of understanding lighted his eyes. Then he grinned and shoved out his hand as he stepped toward old Misery.

"I'm eatin' crow for one time, pard," he said clearly. "You dang ole raw-hider, you'd have shot me shore as hell."

Misery swallowed and pouched his gun. Gripped the sheriff hard and mumbled in his cackling tenor.

"Yeah, Jeff. I promised old Colt to look after my folks. Can't you see the whole play now, pard?"

The sheriff swung about to face Bowdie. "I thought you told me Shotgun was out at the Sixes?" and his voice was gruffer than usual. "I don't know exactly what yore game is, but you better play it easy!"

"Special that offer of his'n to get his Sixes crew of rustlers and clean out the Kitchen," Tombstone chuckled. "You heard him swear to get both the Flying W and the C Bar B, Jeff."

"I don't need no advice from a hoss thief," the sheriff growled. "I'll take you by the heels, yet, Tombstone Perkins."

"You won't," the outlaw contradicted softly. "I've had you under my sights a dozen times, an' never pressed trigger. It was that big jigger yonder what put me on the owl-hoot, and you knows for why. Because I stole a hoss he just about killed."

"Pass that," the sheriff shrugged. "But right now I'm wanting you for the killing of Snag Wilson. Buckaroo on the Sixes, in case you didn't know."

"Don't try to be funny." The voice of Tombstone was caustic. "I knowed who he was when I see him sneak up and line his sights down on old Misery Potts. Misery didn't even know he was anywheres near, so I like to throwed my knife clear through him before he could press trigger."

"He's a dang liar, Sheriff! Now you have got a good excuse to clean out them outlaws back yonder."

Tombstone grinned at the Sixes foreman. "Liar yore ownself," he retorted. "They ain't but one outlaw left in Hell's Basin, and I'm him like you know. You put Snag Wilson up to gettin' Misery, because I heard you do it. Paid him a hundred for the job, but I got the hundred before I tied his corp to his hoss and slapped it on the rump."

"That makes him out a holdup, too," Bowdie shouted. "I paid Wilson two months' riding pay just yesterday. I reckon you won't hold back no longer now, Jeff Saunders!"

Tombstone picked up the scattergun and hooked it over his shoulder by the broad belt. Backed off to one side with his sixgun covering the three men. His voice was a snarl of hate when he answered Bowdie.

"I killed Snag Wilson like I would any other wolf, and you'll get the same the first time I catch you leadin' yore crew back up toward the Kitchen. Sorry to threaten you, Jeff, but don't try to follow me when I leave. I rode roundup with you like Misery done, but you better stay right here and watch them as needs watchin'. Keep 'em covered a couple of minutes, Misery!"

He slid back among the rocks when he finished speaking. Misery Potts watched the sheriff; grinned when he caught the sly wink. Pouched his gun but kept his eyes on the Sixes men while his fingers curled around his gun handle.

"Take after him, Sheriff! We can get him if we split three ways."

Sheriff Saunders faced Bowdie, and his gray eyes were cold. "Chase nobody," he grunted. "That's twice Tombstone has nipped that shotgun killer of yores, and I got me an idea there won't be any third time. Now you and him drag it back to yore own range and stay there."

"I'll get law if I have to bring in the troops," the foreman muttered. "It ain't so far down to Fort Huachuca."

"Yeah? The troops come in when the sheriff asks for help," Saunders retorted dryly. "Now you light a shuck before Ma Bowers orders you off for trespass, in which case I'd have to do my duty. Snag Wilson got what was comin', if you ask me. I was you, I'd stay out of them badlands."

"Now you get me straight," and Curt Bowdie glared around the little circle. "I'm starting a crew of my own back there to round up strays before this Flying W jigger skins the calf crop. We catch him burning a Sixes critter, we know what to do. . . ."

"Better get permission from Ma Bowers to cross her boughten land," the sheriff warned. "It's all of two hundred miles around the other way, and what Ma don't own, the Flying W does. I warned you again' trespass."

"To hell with yore warning," and Bowdie scratched with both feet and bolted down the lane.

"Yo're next, feller." Misery Potts covered Shotgun Thompson. "We catch you on our range, I'm goin' to hog-tie you and neck you to old Pete. And that ox never misses his grain down here at the corral."

Shotgun Thompson shuddered and

walked back to get his horse. The old cowboy followed him with six-gun cocked; threw a shot over the rider's head when Thompson spurred after his boss.

Lass stared soberly at Sheriff Saunders. "You takin' out after Tombstone?" he asked softly.

Jeff Saunders smiled grimly. "If I do, I ain't catchin' him up," he answered quietly. "Snag Wilson was wanted by the law for a killin' down Tempe way, but I didn't tell Bowdie that I was ridin' out to get Wilson when I met him. What I should have done was pin a deputy's star on that outlaw's vest. I figger to clear that old He one of these days."

Sally and Ma Bowers went back to the house and left the three men on the front porch. Old Misery poured a spill querly and rolled it carefully. Bit off and spat the end of the paper away while his thumbnail raked a match and fired the smoke. Lass Winton glanced at the sheriff and winked while he jerked his head at the old cowboy.

"You ever hear of the Triangle T brand?" and Misery waited for the sheriff to answer.

Jeff Saunders nodded slowly. "That brand has been vacated all of twenty years," he said slowly. "Used to belong to old man Tate."

"Yeah," and Misery exhaled a pungent cloud of smoke. "But there's a lot of yearlin's and two's carryin' that iron right close to the Sixes range. Know who bought out that brand?"

"Curt Bowdie bought it," Lass Winton answered. "That's for why he wants our two spreads for an outfit of his own. He claims some of those critters was leppys, and the rest he bought up cheap."

"Funny how them leppys is sidin' their mammies right now." Misery looked off toward the hills. "Most of that she stuff is branded 666, and the get is carryin' that Triangle T."

"Owners' business," the sheriff growled. "And both of them living back in Chicago. But why didn't you tell me before?"

"Figgered you was busy enough," the old cowboy answered. "Figgered you'd read the sign yore ownself sooner or later when you took out after them outlaws up in the Kitchen."

"Don't try to hooraw me, you old spavin," the sheriff growled irritably. "All the outlaws at this end I had to worry about was Colt Bowers, Lass Winton, and old Tombstone. Neither one of the three was wanted bad or I'd have took 'em in." He glared at the old cowboy with his eyes squinted.

"Yeah," Misery answered, his wrinkled face serious. "You better hang around for a bait of grub, and then me and you will take a ride in the moonlight. There's a valley hid back yonder where she's hard to find. Four-five hundred head of that Triangle T stuff feedin' on the high grass. Seein' is believin' with you gents what carries the star."

The sheriff stared thoughtfully while Misery got up and bow-legged over to the horse corral. "What's he figgerin' on?" he asked Lass.

The cowboy shrugged. "I reckon mebbe Bowdie is goin' to move that stuff," he answered. "That Sixes ramrod had everything his way until Tombstone bought chips. You was going to take Misery to Sundown, which would have crippled me plenty. Then he figgered you'd take after Tombstone, which would leave him free to snipe me from the brush."

"You want to quit edgin' up to Bowdie till you get them steers out to pay off yore note," the sheriff warned. "He can close down on you legal unless you raise that cash, and that would give him an open road to the badlands."

"It wouldn't," the cowboy argued stubbornly. "Sally would gun him down just as quick as any man. And Ma Bowers

herself is hell with a shotgun when she gets up her mad."

Both men jumped to their feet when a six-gun exploded back by the horse corral. Old Misery was on the ground slapping at his leg, and he thumbed the hammer twice while they were racing toward him. The old cowboy limped to his feet with the smoking gun in his hand and pointed to a heap down behind the tank trough.

"I slipped just as he pressed trigger," Misery shouted in his shrill, cackling voice. "You know who that feller is, Shur'ff?"

Jeff Saunders walked forward for a closer look. "Never saw him before," he muttered. "You should of shot a mite higher, Misery. This feller ain't even able to talk."

"You ever hear of Gila Gates?"

The sheriff stared at Misery. "Gila Gates was a pard to Snag Wilson," he answered slowly. "And Snag was killed this morning."

"Yeah," Misery snapped. "And she's my idea to tie this bush-whacker on his hoss and slap him one with my hat. There's his mount yonder. Burned Sixes on the left shoulder. . . ."

The sheriff scratched his head. "It would be quite a job to bury him. You got to dang near use dynamite to dig a hole in this caliche." He started away. "I'm in the house talkin' to Ma Bowers. What you do with that corp is yore business, not mine."

Misery watched him for a moment and turned to Lass. "We better put a blind on that cayuse before we lead him up," he suggested. "What you think, boss?"

Winton was leaning over the man on the ground. He felt hopefully for a heart beat, sighed when he found none. Then he turned the dead man's pockets inside out. Misery watched while he smoothed out a crumpled paper and read it aloud.

"Get Misery and high-tail for the valley. Moving tonight."

"No name nor nothin'," the old cowboy complained. "But like I hinted to Jeff Saunders, Bowdie is shoving that Triangle T stuff of his back in the hills. Might be he's got a buyer to take 'em as feeders."

The young owner of the Flying W stuffed the note in his pocket and stripped the bandana from the dead man's neck. Then he walked over to the anchored horse and made a blindfold. The dead man was lifted to the saddle and laid across face-down, and Misery tied him ankle and wrist. Winton jerked the blind and tied the whangs around the horn, after which Misery slapped the horse on the rump with his battered Stetson.

"Git for home, you jughead." Then he turned to Winton with a slow smile. "There's times when it pays to have the misery in yore legs," he chuckled. "That jigger would have got me center if my off shank hadn't let me down just when it did."

"Come and git it!" Ma Bowers came out of the house.

She shaded her eyes and stared at the loping horse as the words died on her lips. Shook her head and remained silent, but her hands patted Lass on the shoulders when he passed. The cowboy kissed her on the forehead. Mumbled under his breath while he avoided her eyes.

"Just one of them Sixes hosses what strayed over here is all. That supper shore smells good, Ma. . . ."

CHAPTER VII
Night Raiders

Sheriff Saunders stood in the shadow of the saddle room and shook his head stubbornly. Misery Potts and Lass Winton had roped out fresh horses and were tightening cinches in preparation for the trip to the hidden valley over on the Sixes range.

"It's too dang plain," the sheriff com-

plained. "That note you took off that feller was a plant to get us all away from the C Bar B. You'll have to stay here and look out for the women folks, Lass."

The cowboy studied for a long moment and then nodded his head slowly. "Reckon yo're right, Jeff. We got no legal right on Sixes range, and like you say, somebody ought to stay here to look after things. I'll stay, but you and Misery take care of yoreselves."

He watched them ride down the lane of pines, and turned to stare at a movement back in the draw where they were holding the wild steers. Something was moving in the shadows near the heavy black-jack bars. The cowboy reached for his gun while he slid forward on the balls of his feet.

"Hands up, cowboy! You make a move and I'll drill you center."

Lass spun around to face a crouching figure at the end of the shed. The shuffle of boots told him that other men were coming up behind him, and he threw himself to the side while his hand continued down to his gun and started to draw. A gun thudded down on his head with a shower of sparks before he could clear leather, and the tall cowboy buckled his knees and slid to the ground with hands reaching out to break his fall.

He was bound hand and foot when consciousness returned, and he raised his throbbing head and sniffed like a dog when the smell of smoke stung the back of his throat. He groaned when he saw that he was in the hay barn, and tried to roll toward the open door. He heard the thud of hoofs racing away from the adobe ranch house.

"Ma!" he shouted with what strength he could muster. "Ma Bowers!"

The double report of a shotgun blasted the night wide open to echo his cry for help. The flames from the burning hay were licking out toward him as the draft from the open door created a suction. The cowboy struggled and shouted when the explosions died away, and then he straightened out with a sigh as his head dropped back in the trough of hay . . .

A pleading voice called to him and firm hands sat him up. Cold water dripped from his face. He tried to get to his feet, but he was gently pushed back. He listened with ears strained as the voice of Ma Bowers came to him from a great distance.

"Wake up, Lass. You've got to help me, son!"

"Shore, Ma," he murmured. "Just you give it a name, Ma."

"Lass," the woman pleaded. "They set fire to the barns, and took Sally with them."

The young cowboy shook his head savagely then. Reached out to grip Ma Bowers tightly by the arm. Then he was swaying unsteadily on his feet.

"It was a trap," he shouted hoarsely. "And I fell in it like a dang Pilgrim. Which way did they go, Ma?"

Ma Bowers dipped water out of the tank and passed him the cup. He drank thirstily and waited for her to answer. Her eyes darted around the ranch yard; came to rest on the canyon corral where the wild steers had been penned.

"Sally went out to see what was keeping you," Ma Bowers explained hurriedly. "There were five or six men, and one of them roped her and dragged her after his horse. Then I heard you call my name like you was in trouble, so I grabbed up my shotgun and slipped out the back door."

"I heard the shotgun," the cowboy said, leaning against the tank. "You get any of them, Ma?"

"They was waiting for me to come out the front, and two of them had guns in their hands. One of 'em won't try to shoot another woman," she muttered grimly.

"But Sally . . ." the cowboy whispered hoarsely.

Ma Bowers shrugged wearily. "They rode down the lane with her before I could reload my shotgun. Then I heard you holler for help, and I see the barn was on fire. I couldn't leave you in there, son. The flames were licking yore boots when I dragged you out and brought you over here to the tank."

"You got to stay here, Ma," he said quietly. "This is some of Curt Bowdie's work, and you tell the sheriff what happened when him and Misery gets back."

"I won't stay," she muttered quietly. "You wouldn't have a chance by yoreself, and I'm siding you whether you like it or not. Done got a horse geared up and waiting back there by the house. . ."

The cowboy watched the roof of the barn fall in, sending the flames leaping high. He was strangely quiet, then nodded his head in agreement. Ma Bowers handed him his six-gun.

"Picked it up there by the saddle shed." Her deep voice was steady and strong. "I got old Colt's iron strapped on my leg, and God help them wolves if they do Sally a meanness!"

The Flying W owner did not answer. He swung up to the saddle on a tall roan and headed down the lane with Ma Bowers at his side. His head was clearing rapidly in the cool night air of the high altitude, and he leaned far over to study the sign on the rocky ground.

"They stampeded them steers down through here to cover their tracks," he muttered grimly. "You game, Ma?"

"I'll go anywhere you do," she answered quietly. "What's in yore mind, Lass?"

He straightened his shoulders with a jerk. "We're lopin' over to the Sixes," he clipped, and his voice was savage and hoarse.

Ma Bowers shook her head doubtfully. "That wasn't a Sixes puncher I killed."

Lass did not hear her. He was standing up in his stirrups watching a red glow just ahead of them. His blue eyes were flaming when he turned to the old woman, and she stifled a sob that tore at her throat.

"We're beat, Lass. That's the Flying W on fire over yonder!"

But she had scarcely finished talking before the cowboy was racing across the broad mountain meadow that marked Flying W range. Ma Bowers was right behind him riding like a man when he spurred into the yard and slid his horse to a stop. Both dropped reins to ground-hitch their mounts as they stepped down in front of the Flying W ranch house.

"Two horses yonder," the cowboy whispered. "Loosen yore six-gun, Ma!"

A running figure leaped around the corner of the house and skidded to a stop with braking heels while his hand slapped down for the gun on his leg. Lass twitched his right shoulder and gunlight framed his tall figure as he dropped the hammer. Triggered again when the fellow staggered back with gun clearing holster leather, and leaned over in a crouch when the man fell like a log.

He pouched his smoking Colt and turned the body over with his boot. Shook his head while he stared at the whiskered face. Turned to Ma Bowers with a question in his eyes.

"Never saw him before. You know him, Ma?"

Ma Bowers shook her head. "Saddle bum, if you ask me. If he was with that crowd that burnt out the C Bar B, I didn't see him."

A dull click whirled them both around. A lathy scarecrow of a man with long black mustaches framing his thin lips was staring at them over the sights of a sawed-off shotgun. Battered hat pushed back with greasy strings of black hair plastered tight to his forehead. They could see the red gleam in his little greenish eyes.

"Shotgun Thompson! I might have knowed you would be sneakin' around somewhere in the dark." The cowboy's voice was bitter.

"Yeah, and we're cleaning up all the rustlers in Hell's Basin tonight," the killer gloated. "Don't you make a pass for yore iron, old woman. I'd just as soon let you have a barrel of buckshot as that buckaroo what's siding you."

Lass shuddered in spite of himself. He could see the killer-light glowing in those little eyes, could see the fingers tightening on the twin triggers by the red glow of his burning barns.

"Keep him covered, Sheriff!" he said suddenly. "I'm right glad you came."

Shotgun Thompson sneered. "Try a new one, feller," he taunted. "That one was old when I was kicking slats out of my cradle."

Ma Bowers huffed up like a cat protecting her kittens. "You can't get both of us," she whispered tensely. "One of us will beat that second barrel before you can swing it around."

"Try it," the killer snarled, and curled his lip up over his broken teeth. "I'll get the both of you. After which I'm dragging yore carcasses inside the house and lighting a pile of hay stacked again the kitchen."

The young Flying W cowboy shuffled his feet until the shotgun swung over to cover him. Then he threw himself forward and to the side just as a terrific explosion blasted out to the left of Shotgun Thompson. Lass felt the heavy buckshot whizzing over his head when the killer was picked up and thrown to one side even as his fingers pressed trigger.

"I told him there wouldn't be no third time," and the plaintive voice of Tombstone Perkins sang a song of victory from the shadows. "He get you anywhere, Lass?"

The cowboy climbed to his feet and dusted himself off. "Never touched me," he growled. "But I was afraid he was going to shoot Ma Bowers first, and then I saw you lining up yore sights off to the side. Good thing for us you came, Tombstone."

"I was trackin' that skunk and his pard, but he slipped me," the outlaw confessed. "Then I see the Flying W burning, and I fogged it over here to find out how come. You seen anything of Curt Bowdie?"

"We was just riding over to the Sixes," came the answer. "The C Bar B was burnt out, and five-six riders took Sally with them after they buffaloed me between the horns and tied me up in the barn."

"And you and Ma was stampedin' over to the Sixes, eh?" Tombstone stated, and blew down the barrels of the sawed-off he had taken from Thompson on the C Bar B. "You know Bowdie could have some of his hands shoot you for trespass after what went on between you two."

"We got to save Sally," the cowboy muttered. "I'll beat that curly wolf no matter how many gunnies he's got on the Sixes."

"Not that way you won't," Tombstone contradicted. "He'd lay back and shoot both you and Ma, and claim he thought you was both men. That feller is smart, Lass. He's done laid several traps, and you've fell right in most of them."

The Flying W owner glared and rubbed the handle of his gun. "He's got us beat now as far as the Flying W is concerned," he growled deep in his throat. "But we still got a chance to heel him if Sheriff Saunders finds them Triangle T critters in that hidden valley."

"I see four or five riders sky-lined when I was high-tailin' it over here," Tombstone remarked musingly. "Strangers to me, but they was heading toward that hidden valley you spoke of. That tell you something, cowboy?"

Lass Winton leaped forward and grabbed the outlaw's arm. "You mean it was them jiggers what took Sally?"

Tombstone nodded, and the fire from the barns glowed redly on his thin face. "They had somebody tied up on a lead hoss," he answered slowly. "Mebbe we better ride over there and see what we can see."

Lass stooped over and picked up the shotgun the killer had dropped. Poked his hand in a pocket of the dead man's coat and came out with a handful of shells. Loaded the murderous weapon and stuck it down in the saddle-boot. His voice was twangy when he swung up to the saddle.

"I come up on any of that crowd, I aim to shoot first and ask questions afterward," he gritted. "Old Misery and Jeff Saunders is over in that hidden valley. . . ."

"Whoa up a spell," Tombstone shouted. "You don't want to go bustin' in there like a dang yearlin'. I'll lead the way till we sight Jeff Saunders, after which I'll just mingle with the scenery while you make medicine."

"They'll have guards out shore and certain," Ma Bowers interrupted.

Tombstone grinned mirthlessly. "There's another way in," he admitted quietly. "I ain't been dodgin' around these Catclaws all this time for nothin'. Which is why I told Lass to let me point the trail."

The cowboy nodded. "Line out," he snapped. "But I don't promise nothing if I get Curt Bowdie under my sights."

CHAPTER VIII
Valley of Mystery

With his habitual caution, Tombstone Perkins disappeared behind a cropping of rock and waited for Ma Bowers and Lass Winton to mount their horses. He was riding a light bay gelding that picked his way between the giant rocks like a mountain goat. The same horse that had outlawed him.

Like the C Bar B, the Flying W range bordered the badlands where twisting canyons and sandy washes made an ideal hiding place for the owl-hoot clan. Tombstone rode in silence with his shaggy eyebrows hiding dark brown eyes that could see almost as well in the dark as most men could by day.

They rode for an hour with scarcely a sound to mark their passing. Lass glanced at Ma Bowers when they followed the outlaw through the entrance of the Devil's Kitchen. His blue eyes misted slightly when she drew herself erect and tried to smile.

"I know, Lass," she whispered. "It was here you found old Colt."

The cowboy rode closer and gripped her hand. "We ain't beat yet, Ma," he answered huskily. "We're shore to find Sally back yonder in the valley."

Tombstone rode to the end of the canyon and swung down behind a row of rocks. "We leave the hosses here," he grunted. "From now on we uses Shanks mare."

"But the valley is quite a ways to the west," the cowboy argued. "You mean we got to walk all that distance?"

Tombstone nodded his head and pointed to the rocky wall. Lava rock and sandstone stretched up to the rimrock where the moon was just edging over to light the way.

"Hidden valley is right over that hogback," he grunted. "Old Colt and me found it one day, and that's one of the reasons why Curt Bowdie wanted him out of the way. Follow me close now, and watch where you put yore feet."

Lass stepped aside for Ma Bowers, and brought up the rear. Climbing the steep wall was like walking up steps, except that the steps were bigger and farther apart. Tombstone climbed without exertion, and when they reached the rimrock he crouched low and waited for the others to come up.

"Watch you don't get sky-lined," he warned. "The moon will be behind us from now on down."

He made himself thin and slipped over the top like a shadow. Held up his hand for silence when Ma Bowers hunkered down beside him, and then he pointed when the younger man slipped over and joined them.

"That's Sheriff Saunders and Misery coming this way," the cowboy whispered. "And there must be four or five riders there at the mouth of the valley."

Tombstone nodded and watched the guards ride in to meet the sheriff. Cattle were bedded down on the grassy floor, and Lass Winton stared unbelievingly.

"That beef stuff is all branded Sixes," he muttered. "And likewise them hosses comin' this away. What you reckon, Tombstone?"

"Shut up and listen," the outlaw grunted. "We're due to find out pronto."

Two of the Sixes cowboys reined in while the third fanned out and rode on to meet Misery and the sheriff. Misery gigged his horse and neck-reined aside to leave a gap between himself and Saunders. The watchers on the shelf above were not more than fifty yards away when the two parties met.

"You find what you was lookin' for, Sheriff?" The Sixes puncher made no attempt to conceal the contempt in his voice.

"Shore did," the sheriff answered gruffly. "Whereat's yore boss?"

"Over on the home spread," the cowboy answered. "And he ain't goin' to like it none too well when he hears about you ridin' in here with that old crow-bait from the Flyin' W."

"What he likes don't make the law in this county," the sheriff answered sharply. "How come them Flyin' W steers to get back in this hidden valley?"

"Wandered in like stock does," came the answer. "And I never saw any of them in here, nohow."

"You tellin' me I'm a liar?"

"You're doin' the tellin'," the cowboy muttered. "You'll find Curt Bowdie over at the Sixes spread."

Misery Potts shouted a warning and spurred his horse to the side. Guns flamed in the hands of two punchers who had stopped well in back of their leader, and Sheriff Saunders went sideways from his saddle and hit the ground rolling.

Lass growled in his throat and lined his six-gun over the shelf with both hands. He pressed trigger just as the leader raised his gun for a shot at the sheriff who was coming up to his knees. The cowboy went backwards over the cantle, and Tombstone triggered his Winchester to empty another saddle on the valley floor.

The third Sixes rider wheeled his horse and raced for the mouth of the valley with Misery Potts throwing lead at him between shouts of anger. He stopped when Lass called above the roaring guns.

"Hold yore fire, Misery. We're comin' on down."

He scrambled down the face of the cliff with Ma Bowers at his heels. Tombstone stayed on the shelf where he could watch the cowboys riding night herd, and he smiled in the darkness when he heard the sheriff's gruff voice.

"Where in hell did you come from?"

"Out of the Devil's Kitchen," the Flying W owner answered promptly. "You see anything of Sally?"

"Seen her back on the C Bar B before me and Misery rode out here," the sheriff barked. "You meanin' to say she rode up thisaway?"

"You got to do something, Sheriff," Ma Bowers almost shouted. "There was a raid on the C Bar B right after you and Misery left. Burned down the barns, knocked Lass over the head with a six-

gun, and carried Sally off with them when they rode away."

"Git back of them rocks, you yappin' idjuts!"

"That's Tombstone Perkins," Misery shouted, and raced for the cover of the rocks. "Come on down here, you ole outlaw!"

"Shut yore yap," Tombstone growled. "You want all them Sixes waddies to know I'm straddled up here?"

All of the party were now behind the rocks at the base of the cliff. The sheriff grunted and tore the left sleeve from his shirt. Pointed to a deep scratch in his shoulder and handed the cloth to Ma Bowers.

"Tie that rag on tight," he growled. "Them bush-whackin' sons like to got me if my hoss hadn't jumped out from under me when the fireworks started."

"You didn't see Sally?" Ma Bowers asked, as she bandaged the wound. "You didn't see them ride into the valley?"

The sheriff shook his head. "We didn't see her, but then me and Misery was riding back in them side draws what run off from the valley. Did you recognize any of them fellers what raided the C Bar B?"

"All strangers to me." Ma Bowers tried to keep the tremble from her deep voice. "But I know it was some of Curt Bowdie's doings."

"We got to have proof of that," and the sheriff frowned. "Like Misery was certain there was four-five hundred head of Triangle T stuff right here in the valley. We didn't find a critter carrying that iron."

Lass Winton stared at old Misery and the sheriff. His eyes held a stricken expression as the truth dawned upon him, and then his mouth tightened grimly.

"They moved that stuff," he growled. "Moved it so we wouldn't have nothing on them. You remember the note we took off that feller back on the C Bar B?"

"I remember, but where would they move a herd that size?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"Funny them night herders is so quiet," Misery interrupted. "I figgered they would give us a fight, seeing they had us bottled in here where we have to pass 'em to get out. . . ."

Lass was staring at a big red steer out on the edge of the sleeping herd. The Sixes cattle were bedded down but the big steer was on the move. Every so often he raised his head and bellowed inquiringly; when an answering call finally came from the upper end of the valley, he lowered his head and set off at a trot.

"That's a Flying W critter," and the young cowboy shook old Misery by the shoulder. "You remember that big brute we necked down to a sapling the first day Sally worked with us?"

Misery nodded his grizzled head. "Likewise, we seen that big roan that I was necking to old Pete when Tombstone rode up and propositioned us," he added. "How you reckon they got up in here?"

"They was hazed up," Lass answered emphatically. "I'll tell you for why. Those two steers were in the canyon corral back on the C Bar B when you and the sheriff rode away after supper."

"Maybe Shotgun Thompson drove 'em over," Misery suggested. "He knew they was our onliest chance to pay off that note his boss holds again' the Flying W."

The cowboy shook his head while furrows of thought stood out on his brow. "Couldn't have been Shotgun," he stated positively. "Shotgun Thompson is dead."

"Dead? Who killed him?" and Sheriff Saunders crowded forward.

"Tombstone let him have both barrels from his own scattergun," Ma Bowers explained quickly, her voice cold. "That killer had me and Lass under his gun while the barns was burning to the ground on the Flying W. Said he was going to kill us both, but just then Tombstone stepped

out of the lavas and pressed both triggers at once."

The sheriff turned and stared thoughtfully at the outlaw crouching up on the rimrock. "You keep yoreself hid for a few days, Tombstone," he said quietly. "Looks like we're going to need you for a witness if we ever come to the end of the tangle."

"I've been hiding for quite a spell, Jeff," Tombstone answered dryly. "I've been waiting to tell you jiggers I just seen a couple riders up the valley aways. They spurred into that twisting wash back there where all them old buffalo bones is piled up."

Misery Potts mounted his horse and uncoiled his rope. Rode out and snared one of the Sixes horses while Lass caught the other one.

"Our hosses is on the other side of the hog-back," he explained to the sheriff when he rode back. "This might be what you call hoss stealin', but Ma and me don't aim to walk no more."

"Them Sixes waddies won't need 'em no more," the sheriff agreed. He turned to shout at Tombstone, "You better bring them other hosses around in case we needs 'em when we get back."

"Shore, Shur'ff, but you want to keep yore eyes skinned if you aim to go up Buffalo Wash. She's my guess that Bowdie brung in some outside help, and a star won't mean nothin' to them fellers."

Ma Bowers was in the saddle when the sheriff caught up his own horse and rode forward. Old Colt's widow had aged twenty years since that day in the Devil's Kitchen, but her strong mouth was set in lines of determination as she checked the loads in her gun.

"Maybe you better stay back here, Ma," the sheriff said softly. " 'Tain't rightly no place for a woman up yonder."

"Don't I know it?" she answered fiercely. "So that's why I'm riding to Buffalo Wash. My gal Sally is back there, and I ain't forgetting that she's a woman too!"

"By Gad, I never thought about that, Ma. But don't you worry none. We'll get her out of there if we have to kill every hired gunnie in Hell's Basin!"

Lass Winton sucked in his breath and jabbed spurs to the Sixes horse. Misery Potts groaned and eased his rheumatic legs sideways in the saddle, but his wrinkled face was hard as granite when he caught up with his young boss.

"There's a cave up Buffalo Wash," he shouted above the bawling of the cattle. "That spell you anything, cowboy?"

"I'll take the cave," Lass answered harshly. "Sally Bowers is my pard, and I'll kill the man that lays a hand on her. Ride yore spurs, you dang old raw-hider!"

CHAPTER IX
Imported Outlaws

Two o'clock in the morning with the high moon fading. Deep shadows along the edges of Hidden Valley where the three men and Ma Bowers rode under cover to the lava rocks. Cattle bawling faintly down at the lower end of the valley where they were again bedding down. Buffalo Wash just ahead, with the opening blocked by the bones of hundreds of buffaloes who had died in a big storm years ago.

Lass reined his horse and raised his hand in warning. The group circled around him when he swung to the ground. Hunkered down on their boot heels while he whispered his discovery.

"Guard up ahead there at the mouth of the wash. I seen him outlined against those skeletons just before you all rounded that bend."

The sheriff nodded his head when he read the cowboy's intention. "Yore job, Lass. Take a hoggin' string to tie him up after you slap him to sleep with the handle of yore gun. . . ."

The tall cowboy unbuckled his spurs and

handed them to Misery. Tightened his belt and snugged his Stetson low over his smoky blue eyes. Loosed his gun of riding crimp and patted Ma Bowers on the arm.

"Won't be long now, honey," and his deep voice was tender. "Come up when you see me wave my hat in front of that graveyard."

"Good luck, son." Ma Bowers raised to her tip-toes to kiss him on the cheek.

The cowboy slipped back among the rocks as silently as a great cat. He smiled grimly while he made his way through the rows of upright rocks with the stealth of an Indian. This was reminiscent of the year he had ridden the owl-hoot trail with old Colt Bowers and Tombstone Perkins. All three had seen the giraffe and found out why the owls hooted. Forced into outlawry by the man who dreamed of making Hell's Basin an empire of his own.

Lass thought of these things while he steadily approached the pile of bleaching bones. Sally Bowers was back there in the cave, and Sally was his pard. Perhaps Curt Bowdie would be back there also . . . The cowboy flexed the fingers of his gun-hand.

He stopped suddenly and flattened out when the tall crown of a black Stetson was outlined against the boneyard. He could not see the man under the hat, and he held his breath while he commenced to inch his way forward. A few feet more and he could make out that the guard was not a Sixes puncher.

The man turned his back and flicked a match with his thumbnail to light his smoke. Lass was on his feet with the flash, slipped forward like a rushing shadow that stopped not more than ten feet away from the sentry. Then he took a deep breath and waited.

The big stranger sucked noisily on his querly and dropped it to the ground. Scraped a spurred boot over the glowing coal and stood his rifle against his leg while he buttoned the collar of his sheepskin coat.

The cowboy stepped forward and clubbed down with his gun. Caught the sagging sentry whose knees buckled, and lowered him to the ground. Stripped the piggin' string from his waist and bound the big man hand and foot, gagging him with his own bandana. After which he stood up in front of the boneyard and waved his arms.

He dragged the victim around behind a clump of rocks and picked up the Winchester. Stepping around the pile of bones, he scanned the floor of Buffalo Wash. Whistled softly when he saw a herd of yearlings and two's bedded down on the grassy meadow between high rocky walls.

"Triangle T herd," he muttered. "No wonder Misery and the sheriff never found them. . . ."

The three riders reined in and swung down as he came around the bone pile and motioned to the towering rocks. Old Misery led the horses back and tied them to a chokecherry bush. Reached for his Winchester and high-heeled back to the group in time to hear the cowboy tell of his discovery.

"That Triangle T herd is back yonder in the wash. I wish old Tombstone was here to see them."

"We can get along without that old owl-hooter," the sheriff said gruffly. "Besides which, them dogies can wait till we see who is roddin' this gang of strangers here in Hell's Basin. Let's get goin'."

"Keep to the edge of the Wash," Misery warned. "That cave lays about two hundred yards back on this side. Maybe we can take them jiggers by surprise."

Lass handed the Winchester to Ma Bowers. "You stop outside to cover us," he whispered. "If any of them fellers makes a break, let him have hot lead."

She took the rifle and nodded grimly.

"You take old Colt's six-gun, Lass. You might need an extra gun if you get in a tight."

The cowboy took the old Peacemaker and stuck it down in the band of his Levis. Then he stepped out and led the way through the rocks with Misery and the sheriff at his heels. They made no sound as they cat-footed behind the rocks toward the gaping mouth of the cave.

Lass stopped and pointed to a dull red glow. "They got a fire inside," he whispered. "One on each side, and I'll take the middle. Let's go!"

He was in the clear and going through the entrance before they could stop him. Misery and Jeff Saunders fanned out and came up fast behind him. The tall cowboy faced a group of sleeping men around the fire and shouted a command.

"Reach high, you sleepers! And keep yore hardware in leather."

Four men sat up jerkily and started to reach for their holsters. Changed their minds when they saw the guns covering them. Raised their hands high and stared stupidly. A fifth man rolled suddenly toward a bound figure just beyond the firelight. His hand slapped leather like the flick of a whip and came up with a weapon that glinted in the cave's red glow.

Lass swiveled his wrist and chopped a shot as a fleeting smile of admiration crossed his face. It took nerve to draw under another man's drop. But it took more than nerve to beat the other man to the shot, and the gunnie had crowded his luck.

An ounce of lead tore into his gunhand and shocked him back on his shoulders as his Colt flew across the cave and thudded against the rock wall. The young cowboy bucked the gun down and thumbed the hammer back for a follow-up shot. Grunted when the stranger caved and acknowledged defeat.

"Don't shoot, cowboy. I got enough!"

Lass ran forward and dropped to his knees beside Sally Bowers. Cut the ropes that bound her and slipped an arm under her shoulders to help her sit up. Her throaty voice trembled with gratitude.

"Knew you'd come, pard. I told myself that all I had to do was sit here and wait. Is Ma all right?"

"Right as rain, Sally," and Ma Bowers came into the cave with her Winchester at the ready. "Is Curt Bowdie anywheres around this hide-out?" She leaned over the girl and peered anxiously into the grimy face.

"I haven't seen him, Ma. These men are all strangers to me."

"They ain't strangers to me," the sheriff interrupted. "That gunnie what's minus several fingers is Red River Tully. Wanted for rustling and robbery, and right now is a good time for him to begin talking. . . ."

The wounded man stared down at his mangled hand. "Ain't talkin'," he muttered sullenly. "And we never hurt the gal none whatever!"

"You jiggers fired the C Bar B and the Flying W," the sheriff barked. "You ever see that dungeon they call the Snake's Den over at Yuma prison?"

The wounded man stared thoughtfully at the fire. Studied the faces of his companions for a long moment, and then nodded to himself.

"What if I talk?" he asked.

"Might take a few years off yore time," the sheriff answered. "Who brought you gunnies in here to Hell's Basin?"

"I ain't tellin'." The rustler glared defiantly. "We took our chances when we was hired!"

"So you was hired," the sheriff almost shouted. "For a while I thought maybe you was workin' on yore own. Is Curt Bowdie paying the bills?"

"Ask him," and the rustler dropped his eyes. "The rest of you long-riders keep yore faces shut!"

A bearded man at the end of the line

licked his lips. Then he nudged the man next to him and spoke from the corner of his mouth. The sheriff watched with a knowing smile on his face.

"Speak it out, Sam Alto," he prompted. "Yo're wanted for the same reasons as Red River!"

"That Yuma Pen is a hell of a hole," the bearded rustler muttered. "Men dies over there like flies. You promise us a let-down if we makes medicine?"

The sheriff nodded eagerly. "I promise you a fair trial and a few years off yore sentence," he agreed. "Who hired you gunnies to slip in here between two suns?"

Red River interrupted. "You talk, and I'll settle with you personal, Sam," he warned savagely. "Yo're in it up to yore neck, and you better keep yore jaw tight!"

Sam Alto raised his big head and glared at Red River. "For why should we rot out in Yuma prison while that ridin' boss gets away plumb clean?" he growled. "The man don't live that can cut a rusty on me while he takes the profits. If I do time, he's going to do some right alongside of me!"

Lass Winton watched the two outlaws closely. Sally was rubbing her ankles and wrists while Ma Bowers swiveled her Winchester to cover the prisoners. Sheriff Saunders waited patiently for Sam Alto to break.

"To hell with you, Red River. Maybe you got a bigger cut than the rest of us, but we done lost five-six men already tonight. Layin' out there for the buzzards, while that Sixes ramrod stays to home and fixes himself an alibi. It was Bowdie brought us in, Shur'ff."

Red River levered to his feet and jumped for the big man. Misery Potts stepped forward and slapped down with the barrel of his six-gun. Stepped back again with a low chuckle when Red River sprawled on his face and straightened out.

The sheriff reached for his handcuffs. "Tie them other jiggers up while Ma keeps 'em covered, Misery."

Sam Alto shivered and watched Ma Bowers. "We'd have made a clean get-away if it hadn't been for the old woman," he muttered. "She tore Slim Cawley half in two with a double load of buckshot just when we thought we was in the clear."

Misery Potts tied off his prisoners and then cuffed the hands of Red River behind his back. He straightened up and stared around the cave. Turned back to the sheriff with a puzzled look on his wrinkled face.

"Whereat's Lass? He was here just a minute ago."

"Reckon he went to bring up the hosses," the sheriff grunted. "Lead these rustlers outside so we can start back to Sundown."

Ma Bowers walked over to a horse and pouched her Winchester in the saddle-boot. Then she reached for the reins and swung up while Sally Bowers followed suit.

"We'll help Lass bring up them hosses." Ma Bowers gigged her mount with the spurs. "C'mon, Sally."

The two women loped down the wash and through the boneyard. Ma Bowers rode behind the pile of rocks and then rode back again.

"He ain't here, Sally," she told the girl. "You better take these hosses back for Misery and Jeff Saunders. I'll just lope along and see what Lass is up to."

"I will not." Sally spurred up close to her mother. "I know where Lass is going the same as you do, and I promised to side him all the way down the river!"

Ma Bowers studied for a moment. "You figger he's on his way to the Sixes?" she asked without looking up.

The girl nodded. "He gave me old Colt's gun back there in the cave, and now he might need us to give him a hand. But he won't be alone, Ma."

"You mean Tombstone will be with

him," and Ma Bowers stared at the girl. "Sometimes I think that old outlaw ain't just what he's cracked up to be."

She rammed the steel home and rode like a man when the big buckskin tried to jump from under the saddle. Sally was right at her stirrup. The first light of dawn slipped over the high Catclaws when they spurred out of Hidden Valley and pointed for the Sixes range.

CHAPTER X
A Visitor from Chicago

Mounted on the Sixes horse he had borrowed without permission, Lass Winton crowded the animal in a racing lope across the floor of Hidden Valley. Gun in hand, he tore through the entrance without slackening his speed. The mournful hoot of a burrow owl rose above the pounding of his horse's hoofs.

Not a week removed from the owl-hoot trail, he reined toward a row of tall rocks. Answered the call with head thrown back, and grinned when Tombstone Perkins rode out to meet him.

"You find Sally back yonder?"

"Found her and five rustlers," the cowboy answered grimly. "Likewise, we found that Triangle T herd up Buffalo Wash. Sam Alto caved in and talked. Named Curt Bowdie as the ramrod of that rustlin' spread."

Tombstone nodded. "Slide down offen that Sixes bronc and pull the latigo," he grunted. "I got yore own hoss waiting right here. Reckon you and me better ride over and make gun-talk with Curt Bowdie."

Lass swung down and unsaddled. Slipped the throat latch and turned the weary horse loose. True to his training, he hung the bridle on the horn, and turned the saddle so the air would get to the sheep-lined skirts. Swung up on his own horse.

"Right," he growled, "and I'll take Bowdie myself."

"Fair enough," Tombstone grinned. "I'll take care of the rest of those Sixes hands if they want to mix it. Might have a little surprise for you when we get there."

The false dawn slanted across the rimrocks high up on the Catclaws. Smoke curled up from the ranch house a mile ahead. Headquarters of the 666. Lass smiled again and reined down to a walk.

"Some of them Sixes punchers ain't bad fellers," Tombstone remarked carelessly as he came alongside. "But it might be just as well to slide in easy just in case of."

Daylight was just breaking through when the two men swung down at the corrals and threw slip-knots in their macartys. Not a man was in sight among the buildings when they hitched their belts and high-heeled it across the dusty yard.

Tombstone slid close to the building while Lass Winton stepped up on the porch and cat-footed across to the heavy door. Two men were talking inside the big front room, and the cowboy turned the knob and stepped in without the formality of knocking. He covered the big Sixes foreman with his gun while his blue eyes watched the stranger.

Curt Bowdie dropped his hand away from his holster and leaned back against the side of the stone fireplace. The stranger was dressed in city clothes, and he pushed back from the table covered with account books. Waited for Bowdie to speak, but his shrewd face showed interest in the intruding cowboy.

"Maybe you come bustin' in here at five in the morning to pay that note you owe me," Bowdie sneered. "And you better put up that gun before the sheriff hears about this!"

"The C Bar B was burned down last night, Bowdie." Lass Winton kept his voice low. "Them steers I was catching to pay yore note was run off, but I'll have yore money in time."

The foreman shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not interested in yore losses," he answered.

"But you are interested in getting the Flying W range for yore own spread," the cowboy retorted bitterly, "so's you can run that Triangle T herd of yores without answering too many questions."

Bowdie continued to smile, and his voice was mocking. "You and the sheriff find any Triangle T critters?"

Lass nodded his head. Answered the smile while his hand slid down to holster his gun. Then the smile left his face, and his voice was hard when he answered the Sixes ramrod.

"The fellers what burned down the C Bar B also took Sally Bowers with them. Then they turned loose those Flying W steers to cover their tracks. We found them steers up in Hidden Valley."

"Yeah? So what, cowboy?"

"There's a place up there in Hidden Valley," Lass continued, "where a herd of buffalo piled up years ago during a big storm. Buffalo Wash, they calls it to this day, and that's where we found that Triangle T herd. . . ."

Curt Bowdie glanced at the city man and hunched his big shoulders. "And you killed two Sixes cowboys," he almost whispered. "I'm takin' up for them hands of mine, you meddlin' rustler!"

His right hand slapped down for the gun on his leg before he had finished speaking. The young cowboy reached at the same time, buckled his knees to throw the moulded holster down away from his sliding gun. Chopped a shot just when Bowdie's muzzle was tilting up with hammer thumbed back.

A slug battered low in the door and the weapon flew from the foreman's hand. The cowboy caught the bucking gun in his hand and crouched across the smoking barrel. Curt Bowdie was holding his right hand tightly with his left, in an effort to stop the flow of blood.

"Stand hitched!" The cowboy's voice was savage. "We found Sally Bowers back in the cave in Buffalo Wash. We'd have missed her and that Triangle T herd both if yore men hadn't run off them wild steers of mine. Mavericks that I sweated for to pay off yore note."

"I thought you said those fellers was rustlers?" Bowdie stripped the bandana from around his neck and made a tourniquet above his wrist.

"They was, and one by the name of Sam Alto talked to the sheriff who was ramroddin' that rustlin' outfit. Said if he had to do time over in Yuma prison, the feller what hired them was goin' to do a stretch right alongside of him. . . ."

Curt Bowdie stopped tying the bandage and glanced up then. Fear swept across his tanned face to leave it a sickly gray, and his eyes swept across the room to the gun on the floor.

The foreman turned to the city man. "You saw this jigger come bustin' in here, Mister Curry. I'm counting on yore testimony when he comes to trial."

"I saw him, Bowdie," the stranger answered dryly. "Glad to see you again, Winton. Where did you leave Tombstone Perkins?"

"Right here, boss," and Tombstone stepped through the door. "I see you got here right on time."

Curt Bowdie stared at the three men. "That skinny jasper is an outlaw, Curry," he shouted. "He's wanted for hoss stealin' and for murder!"

Curry shook his head. "That bay belonged to me," he answered, and the tone of his voice matched the hard look in his eyes. "I likewise heard about Snag Wilson and Shotgun Thompson, so I thought I better take a run out here from Chicago and see what was going on."

"You can hunt yoreself a new foreman

if that's the way you feel toward them that's been robbing you blind." Bowdie slid to his heels and leaned against the wall. "I'm through here on the Sixes!"

"Not yet you ain't," Tombstone contradicted flatly. "Not until you pay Ma Bowers and Lass Winton for burning down their barns full of feed. After that you can talk to Curry about that Triangle T herd you rustled from him. Stuff that never did show up in the calf tally."

Bowdie straightened up and cocked his head. Then he grinned when his eyes swept through the open door. Some of the old confidence returned to his voice when he spoke.

"Yonder comes the sheriff. I'll do plenty talking when he gets here."

Sheriff Saunders swung down with Misery Potts at his side. Came into the room with his gun in his hand, and smiled frostily when he saw the bandage on Bowdie's hand.

"Thanks for not killin' him, Lass," he grunted. "Howdy, Mister Curry."

"Howdy, Jeff. Things was just like you and your deputy wired me: ARREST CURT BOWDIE FOR RUSTLING SIXES STOCK."

The foreman rolled over like a cat and grabbed the gun on the floor. Levered to his knees with the weapon in his left hand just as a Winchester swung through the window and buffaloed him between the ears.

"There, dang yuh!" Ma Bowers stuck her head through the window with Sally right behind her. "I hope he don't die," she muttered softly. "From what old Colt told me about that Yuma prison. . . ."

Sheriff Saunders walked slowly across the floor and reached to the back of his belt. Pulled the unconscious man's hands behind his back, and clicked the bracelets shut.

Misery gleefully took a bucket of water and poured it over the head of the Sixes ramrod. The big man came to his haunches with his head and shoulders shaking like a steer coming through a creek. Then he saw the circle of faces and sank back against the wall.

"You was pretty cute, Bowdie," the sheriff said musingly. "But not cute enough to out-think three good men what you had outlawed. Tombstone Perkins has been my deputy for 'most a month, and him and Lass was working together back there in the lavas."

"You can't cut it," the foreman growled like a wounded bear. "Both them fellers was wanted by the law!"

The sheriff smiled grimly and shook his head. "Curry withdrew that charge again Tombstone, and made him a present of that bay gelding when he heard the story. Tombstone was on the prod for what you done to old Colt and Lass, so they both decided to stay hid out and get you dead to rights."

"In case you didn't know it, Lass Winton is working for the Cattleman's Protective Association," Curry explained softly. "Them range detectives are hell on rustlers. . . ."

"I was branding mavericks the same as he was," Bowdie shouted. "An unbranded critter without its mammy belongs to the man who gets his iron on it first."

"I'll sign the complaint, Sheriff," Curry said, and turned to Lass Winton. "I promised you a third of them so-called mavericks if you proved your charges and recovered the stock. That still stands good, and I'll take your tally on the count."

Lass grinned and stuck out his hand. "The Sixes is holding that paper again' me," he chuckled. "I'll pay it off as soon as we figger that maverick money out."

"Forget it," Curry snapped. "A man is responsible for the acts of his agent, and Bowdie was working for me when he burned your barns. He had enough percentage coming to pay that off, and I'll see that you get it."

Ma Bowers came through the door and

smiled with her lips tight as Curt Bowdie glared at her. Lass walked out on the porch and took a deep breath of morning air.

Sally was waiting with the horses under a *ramada* near the kitchen, and the cowboy stared at her for a long moment. Tall for a girl, with the full figure of budding womanhood. Brown hair and eyes. A pard to ride the river with.

He slipped up quietly and put his arms around her. The girl turned quickly with hands gripping his arms. Then she relaxed with a little sigh and leaned her face against his wool shirt.

"Lass! So you finally found time to think about me. . . ."

"Never stopped thinkin' about you for a minute, Sally," he murmured in her hair. "It was hell last night when we was trying to find you. I'd have killed Curt Bowdie if he had put a hand on you."

The girl shivered and held tightly to him. "But he didn't . . . and you didn't," she whispered. "Will we still be pards now, Lass?"

"We will if Ma will let me buy in on the C Bar B," he chuckled. "You ain't jealous because I loves Ma the way I do, are you, pard?"

"No," she whispered, "but you haven't told me. . . . ."

"I'll always love you," he said huskily, and tightened his arms. "And I'll always be glad for what we found back in the badlands. That was what brought us so close together."

"I don't understand, Lass. What did we find back there?"

The cowboy held her tighter and chuckled close to her ear. "Maverick money," he whispered. "And it won't be long before I put my brand on you!"

LONE STAR STATE

Salute To The Texas Centennial! You Will Find All The Flavor Of The Range Country In This Breezy Recital Of Boyhood Recollections. A Native Son, Now A Noted Author, Looks Backward Over The Years And Says "Howdy!"

This year they are celebrating, with oratory, exhibitions, and patriotic boastings, the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Texas. Again we remember the Alamo, still standing among the San Antonio skyscrapers, where Travis, Crockett, Bowie, Bonham and the others were killed by Santa Anna's men.

We read again of the heroism of sucn matchless fighters as Big Foot Wallace and Deaf Smith. The Texas Rangers are glorified. Editorial writers and orators point out that Texans are not only the citizens of a great state (bigger, by gum, than all of Germany) but that they are practically a race apart.

Texas, never bashful, and always addict-

By STANLEY WALKER

(Author of "Mrs. Astor's Horse," "City Editor," etc.)

ed to superlatives, is proud of its industries, its commerce and its tall buildings. All very well, but the Texas I remember best has nothing to do with the long ribbons of paved highways, the big sleek automobiles and the tall modern hotels and office buildings.

I have been away a long time, but I have always been a bug on Texas history, and I have read much on the personalities —strange, heroic and depraved—who had their part in bringing what is loosely called civilization to that broad and often hot and windswept empire. For these were my people. My ancestors were among the first to filter into Texas by way of Tennessee and Mississippi, and they came in covered wagons.

If you leave Austin, the capital city which sometimes wears a purple haze, and drive northwest along the Edwards Plateau, you will come, after forty or fifty miles, to a country of chalk hills, small streams and lovely valleys dotted with live oaks where they raise cattle, sheep, goats and turkeys.

There are prickly pears, elm trees, dogwood, Spanish oak, pecan trees, mesquite, sycamores, poplars and cottonwood. In the spring it is lovely. In July, August and September it is usually dry and in the daytime it is hot as hell; and don't let any booster try to tell you it isn't.

After a time you will come to an old town named Lampasas, which never grows much and never dwindles much, and where, I assume, Buck Berry still runs one of the best barber shops in all America.

Fifteen miles northwest of this old town is the small ranch where I was born, and where some of my people still live. They tell me that the old rambling house built by my grandfather right after the Civil War has been torn down and replaced by something sort of fancy. They have named the estate something or other to make it sound better than just "the old place." As a boy I chased little dogies, worth about $10 a head, over these hills; now they raise pedigreed, beautiful white-faced cattle and sell them for big prices.

The place is on a stream called School Creek, so named because the pioneers once built a school there. In good seasons one may catch trout, perch, catfish and the bony suckers, but more often it is so dry that the pools are stagnant.

When my grandfather, Thomas Edward Stanley, driving from Austin in a covered wagon, first saw this valley, with the high hills all around, he thought it a lovely place and decided to settle down. There he worked for the rest of his life—worked harder, I think, than any man I ever knew. He died only a few years ago; he would be 104 years old if he were alive today. He built the old house out of lumber, brought the ninety miles from Austin. Then he and a strong hired man named Conrad quarried rocks out of the cliffs and built what fences they needed, for that was in the days before barbed wire had hemmed in the country.

Just down the creek, where it empties into the Lampasas River, lived old "Doc" Townsen, about the same age as my grandfather. They used to tell me of Indian scares, for when they came to that country the Comanches were not yet entirely subdued. But of the details of those stories, which seemed so exciting at the time, I remember nothing at all.

My grandfather and "Doc" Townsen were men of peace, but when they first came there the country was pretty wild, and some of the boys up in the hills were not above raising a little hell now and then. My grandfather allowed only one bottle of whisky on the place in all the time he lived there, and Grandma made him throw that away. And once one of "Doc" Townsen's sons came home a little boiled, took a good whaling from the old man, and that was the last of that. But from time to

time, from up and down the river, would come tales of violence.

A little way down the river lived the Higgins clan. They had many friends. They were vigorous, clean-limbed cattlemen, good citizens in every way but inclined sometimes to be a bit hot-headed. Their descendants still live, for the most part, in those hills along the river, and they are all fine people.

One, J. Tom Higgins, has long been County Judge of Lampasas County. The greatest of the clan was John Pinckney Higgins, as fearless a man as ever rode the range. He was known as "Pink" Higgins, and is referred to in the literature dealing with that section as "The Good Bad Man." He was of medium height, blue-eyed, and wore a mustache, as did most men in those days.

Pink Higgins, with R. A. Mitchell, was the leader of one faction in the long and bloody war known as the Horrell-Higgins feud, which began in 1873 and lasted for many years, until most of the Horrells were dead or chased out of the country.

Pink was a tough one when he wanted to be. The story is that once, when employed as a range rider on Spur and Matador properties, he was instructed to prevent thieves from stealing cattle. One day he came upon a trespasser who had killed a cow and was starting to skin it. Pink shot the man, killing him almost instantly. Then he cut open the cow, put the man inside, and rode into town to tell the peace officers that if they would go to a certain place they would find a most extraordinary phenomenon of nature, a cow giving birth to a man.

After that performance, there was little trouble with cattle thieves when Pink Higgins was riding. This is not to say that old Pink was particularly bloodthirsty; he was merely a hot-headed, whimsical fellow who wasn't afraid of anything and who would fight to the death for what he believed to be his rights.

The war between the Higgins clan and the Horrell faction had several counties in a stew. Men were ambushed, and again there would be pitched battles. Finally in 1877 Major John B. Jones, of the frontier battalion of Texas Rangers, induced the leaders of the opposing forces to sign a peace treaty, a document surcharged with emotion.

The boys probably really meant to stop fighting when they signed the truce, but nothing of the sort happened. But they were brave men, reckless and easily aroused to fighting pitch. And the feud had gone on too long and burned too deep. Occasional fights lasted for years until there was no one left on one side.

On long winter nights, by fireplaces up in the cold hills, I used to hear the old men talk of these dreadful days. And I knew most of the living members of the families who had had a part in the shootings. They were all fine looking people, like most of those reared in that section. (Indeed, I was the runtiest lad for miles around, never weighing more than 110 pounds. If I had weighed even thirty pounds more I probably would still be there, but I was too frail to handle a lively yearling or a rambunctious horse.)

I remember the valley, with its encircling ridges, as a place of almost unbroken peace, and sometimes now I am sorry for city kids who never had the chance to ride, to fish, and to hunt for quail, doves, squirrels, rabbits, coons, possums, plover and duck. And there was the occasional great excitement of jumping a wolf with the dogs and riding hell-bent for many miles, sometimes getting the wolf, but more often losing him in the broken country.

Deer were rare, although there were plenty of them thirty and forty miles to the west, in the brakes and bottoms along

the Colorado River. And a little farther to the southwest there were puma, or mountain lions, called "painters" by the old folks who swore they had heard them scream like dying children in the night.

I remember the day in September, 1907, when they killed the last jaguar ever to be taken in Texas; it was in Mills County, not far from the old home place, and the stories were that the great animal killed many fine dogs before he finally was brought down.

What heroes there were then! I read much of old Sam Houston, though the books of those days, unless I'm mistaken, had little or nothing about his degenerate days with the Indians, who called him contemptuously "The Big Drunk." And I read of Jim Bowie, who made the famous knife, and of that other brave Bowie whose first name, for some fool reason, was Resin. And of gallant Fannin, so cruelly shot down at Goliad. I learned to hate the Mexican General Santa Anna almost as bitterly as if he had done something to me personally.

And there were other heroes alive then. There was, of course, my grandfather Stanley, tall and white-haired, with a fine white beard, an eagle's beak of a nose, looking just as Uncle Sam should look, and willing always to tell me for the hundredth time how he had once killed a bear as a boy back in Tennessee. And my grandfather Walker, a short, quiet, dark little man who had fought in the Confederate Army and who always seemed tired to the point of exhaustion.

And there was an old fellow named Colonel Morgan, who used to tell me of the wars, and show me the stump of a finger which had been cut off by a minie ball at Shiloh. And down the river lived a bold cowpuncher named Lige Moore, prematurely bald, who was a great swimmer and diver. He could stay under water for what seemed an interminable period, and when so minded he would dive down deep into a blue hole of water and catch a giant catfish with his bare hands. What a fellow!

There was, too, the immortal Booger Red, probably the hardest-bitten man who ever lived, who came to town once for an exhibition of bulldogging and bronco-busting. His face was the color of a boiled lobster, and he walked stiff-legged. I was very young at the time, and the man was so ugly, and so terrible in his recklessness, that I was genuinely frightened. The Booger rode all over the Southwest, a holy terror.

Another hero was my uncle, Ernest Walker, who is still alive. He was a great cattleman in his day; he could ride around a herd on the range and estimate the average weight of the cattle within a very few pounds of the correct figure. He used to disappear into the bush for days on his horse, and then ride back into town so grimy, bewhiskered and generally unkempt that it was hard to recognize him. Two hours later he would be walking downtown in a neat black suit, the smallest boots I ever saw on a man, a big black hat, black bow tie, and white and black striped silk shirt—undoubtedly the best dressed man who ever walked the streets of a cowtown.

I suppose I liked him because there was something a little sinister about him, or I thought there was. Anyway he had been in a lot of little wars of his own, and had been wounded several times, but he never talked much about it. He had handled cattle in almost every part of Texas and Oklahoma; the last I heard from him he was in poor health, but eager to get a stake and raise cattle on the limitless ranges of Sonora down in old Mexico.

It used to be a lot of fun in Texas, though it didn't always seem like it at the time. There was, for example, the great day when my father won a wrestling match from the sheriff, Albert Mace, a big handsome man who later, during the oil-boom

days, was the hard-hitting police chief of Mexia, Texas. I must say my father fooled me that day; he was outweighed considerably by Mace, but he was an excellent athlete in those days.

We used to have picnics and fish fries, and sometimes a baseball game between wild young men representing various sections, games which often ended in fights with knives. And at Christmas (never on the Fourth of July) we would shoot off all the firecrackers and roman candles we wanted to.

Texas, after the wild days were over, or almost over, began getting religion very seriously. Camp meetings, usually held under a brush arbor and lasting two weeks, a period usually long enough to save all sinners for miles around, were great social affairs.

As a boy I remember hearing the eloquent Rev. Dr. George W. Truett of Dallas, now recognized as one of the world's great preachers. And another preacher, the Rev. E. C. Routh, now in Oklahoma, sometimes conducted the camp meetings; he still writes me now and then, chiding me gently for what he thinks is my worldliness.

But I think the sermon which made the deepest impression on me was one delivered at a temperance meeting one night by the Rev. Tom Sessions, a terrific speaker with a fierce black mustache. He had been campaigning for prohibition in that county, talking his head off for weeks. I remember his last words in that speech were: "If all the speeches I've made in this fight have the result only of saving one mother's son from taking one glass of beer, I shall not feel it has been in vain."

Even at that time I suspected that he was willing to go to a lot of trouble to prevent one glass of beer from being drunk; as I grew older I was sure of it. But there wasn't much drinking in those days. A few prominent men were known to be "secret drinkers," and dreadful whispers went around about them. I took my first drink with a youngster about my own age named Milton Healer. A tall old nester from way over in Coryell County took us back of Stokes Brothers general store one night, pulled a bottle of whisky from his hip pocket, and bade us God speed. I gurgled down a long, fiery draught, with no chaser. I was drunk as a goat. I've forgotten the name of the man who gave that drink to me. All I remember about him is that he was rather gaunt, and had a black mustache. I've often wondered how he made out during prohibition; I should have liked to send him some good stuff from New York. And thanked him for introducing me to a drink which, taken in proper amounts and in pleasant circumstances, can do much to relieve the tedium of what might otherwise be an intolerably dreary and pointless world.

Out on the old place we had all we wanted to eat always. There was beef, mutton, pork, many sorts of game and fish, and we always had a big orchard and garden. The cellar, in winter, was lined with things my mother had canned. I remember best the canned peaches and the pear preserves. There were thousands of cans of tomatoes, too, but I've since learned that they are principally good for hangovers, with which I was never bothered in those innocent days.

Some days were sad, usually when some one died. The first person I ever saw killed, though I had seen wounded men before, was a boy of my own age named Marion Piper. He lived on a farm a little way up the river. One day he and I were riding our horses at a fast lope down a hill.

There had been a light rain, and the ground was slippery. As Marion passed a tree, his horse shied and then slipped, throwing Marion to one side. His head was neatly, brutally, bashed against the tree trunk. And then everything was quiet.

His horse stood still. Marion did not move. I had never realized before what a flimsy thing the human skull can be. I rode to the nearest house, and older folks got a wagon, picked up the boy and took him home under a blanket.

It was fortunate, I suppose, that my father had a great many books about the house. (He took over the old place when my grandfather got tired of running it.) Somehow father was always a sucker for knowledge. He was, and is, a man of many talents: he could wrestle, ranch, farm, teach school and make speeches. He was always buying sets of books.

I must have read a hundred novels before I was twelve years old, and they were mostly good ones too, but what I liked best was a book dealing with the explorations of George Rogers Clarke, and a big red set of Ridpath's History of the World. I was a fool about Ridpath's stuff, especially the pictures dealing with the Roman Empire.

One day I read somewhere that buzzards did not find carrion by smelling it, but solely by sight. Now, this went contrary to everything I had been led to believe. I determined to test the matter. I figured that if I played dead I might fool the buzzards. I went way out on the pasture, walked up an arroyo among the bushes, and then stealthily crawled out into an open spot and proceeded to lie still and play dead. I kept my straw hat over my head, for it was terribly hot.

I must have lain there for six hours, without moving, except to cock my eye occasionally at the sky to see if the buzzards were falling for my little joke. Two or three buzzards were zooming up in the stratosphere, but they paid no attention to me. I went home still half-convinced that buzzards found their food by their sense of smell.

My people encouraged me to be independent, to conserve my resources, to save a little bit out of everything I earned, and to regard property with great respect. They might as well have saved their breath. I never had any business acumen. Once I raised an orphan calf, lavishing all sorts of care and affection on the beast. When it was a year old a cattle buyer came by one day and wanted to buy it.

He asked me what I would take for it. "Well," I said, "I want $10, but if you won't give me that much, I'll take $8." I was only seven or eight years old at the time, but my handling of that transaction is absolutely typical of every business deal in which I have become involved since then.

When I think of Texas I don't think of Chambers of Commerce, or of these newfangled experiments in government, or of the traffic problems. I think mostly of the tales about old Pink Higgins, of scraping hogs after they have been scalded and then eating fresh sausage for breakfast, of the trips over into the brush country to gape at a primitive Baptist foot washing, of rounding up cattle out of the hills and dipping them to kill the ticks (there are no ticks, and consequently no tick fever, in all that great country today).

I think of the mean little burro I owned when I was a very small boy, of the dark-haired girl across the river for whom I had a holy and tender attachment, of the fun it was when the flood came to try to rope drowned cows and sheep from the bridge, of the time when a strong boy named Aubrey Lancaster (he died of flu in the war) saved me from drowning, of my grandfather Stanley's curious habit of taking a chew of tobacco every morning while pulling on his pants, of the tow-headed little hellion (he's serving a life term for murder now) who used to play with me . . .

Of the rare times when my Uncle Jim Stanley would come down from his big place up in the Panhandle and tell me of the great doings up in that level, spacious

land. And the time my dog was bitten by a big rattlesnake, and sulked for days in the mud until the poison was gone. Of my regret when I shot a large, beautiful blue crane, which shouldn't have been killed. These things, and a thousand others, seem a million years away, but they were part of me, and for me they are Texas.

When I was sixteen years old I left the old place. At Austin, where I attended the University of Texas, a whole new world opened up to me, though I was sometimes accused of not studying hard enough.

Among the faculty I made some good friends. There was old Killis Campbell, and J. Frank Dobie, (the man who later wrote "Coronado's Children"), both of whom tried with infinite patience and understanding to teach me how to write simply and clearly. And there was W. D. Hornaday, who first got me interested in the newspaper business.

I loved Austin. It was peaceful and friendly, and the hills and the Colorado River were beautiful. I learned to drink beer, to dance, and to make small talk to the girls. I never had much money, but I had a lot of fun.

The first Texas Rangers I ever saw were three in big hats lolling in front of the Governor's Mansion, at that time occupied by that stormy, friendly but misguided man, James E. Ferguson. The Rangers seemed to me to be too fat, rather slovenly and generally unprepossessing.

I spent a good deal of time in the Library at the university, a beautiful building which now contains a remarkable collection of books bequeathed to it by Major George W. Littlefield, one of the town's richest men. And I haunted the State Capitol, looking at the statues and the paintings—some of them, I fear, a bit ludicrous. I remember particularly the famous painting of the meeting of Santa Anna and Sam Houston which hung in the rotunda of the capitol. The artist, to make his point clear, showed the great scout Deaf Smith, with his hand cupped to his ear.

The men in school with me were of exceptional quality, or so it seems to me. There was Eugene Penn, a handsome fellow who lost his life during the war in an airplane in Italy; his younger brother Albert, now an insurance man in Austin, who is said to be one of the really competent experts on Texas lore, geography and history; John D. Cofer, the tallest man in school, now a lawyer in Austin; Richard A. Knight, son of the late Col. R. E. L. Knight of Dallas, who is now a lawyer in New York.

Then there were Edward Angly and Jack Beall, who were to work with me on a newspaper in New York; E. O. Thompson, who married a Metropolitan Opera singer and became the rich Mayor of Amarillo, Texas; Al Powers, who later went to Mexico and wound up as an advertising man in New York; Julien Elfenbein, who thought he was going to be an orator but who turned out to be a commercial artist and advertising expert.

Walter Evans, who had one crippled foot, but who was one of the best dancers in school; Silas Ragsdale, now editor of the Galveston *News;* Maury Maverick, who was shot up during the war and who now is rapidly becoming one of the most respected Representatives in Congress; William Hoge, who became a banker in New York; Arthur Uhl, now a lawyer in San Antonio—there were dozens of them, some rich today, others forgotten, but all of them a part of a patchwork of my memories of Texas.

I learned more about Texas in Dallas, where I went after almost three years at the university to work on the Dallas *Morning News,* a great old newspaper published by that kindly and thoughtful gentleman, Mr. George B. Dealey.

Dallas had a tempo vastly different from

that of sleepy Austin. It was then, as it is today, a business town. There is really not a great deal about its life to stamp it as a Texas city; that is to say, it has much of the atmosphere of a lively Eastern or Northern city, with neither the languor of the South nor the wild and woolly aspects of a Western frontier town. It even "feels" different from San Antonio, El Paso, or Houston.

I didn't make more than enough to live on then (who ever does?) but it was a great life. I worked as a reporter and was on duty usually from noon until about two o'clock the next morning. Among a dozen or so other "runs" I often covered hotels. It was the custom to snare visiting celebrities and interview them, more often than not on the glories of Texas and the great commercial and industrial destiny of Dallas. (Texas will never grow up, it seems, in this respect; it has practically no capacity for self-criticism.)

It was hot stuff when old Col. E. H. R. Green, son of Hetty Green, came to the Adolphus Hotel, ponderously dragging along his crippled leg. The genial colonel, who spent part of his young manhood in Texas getting even richer than he already was, always was good for a story.

And when William Jennings Bryan and Irvin S. Cobb came to town it was big news. Lord, I remember once I was even pretty much excited over getting an interview with Cato Sells, who was Commissioner of Indian Affairs at the time, and who was never notorious for his reticence. And once the great former Senator from Texas, the silver-tongued Joseph Weldon Bailey, came down from Washington for a visit and overwhelmed me with the magnificence of his presence.

During most of my period on the *News* I lived with Silliman Evans, another reporter who later, for a time at the beginning of the F. D. Roosevelt administration, was an Assistant Postmaster General. He is now head of a big casualty company in Baltimore and stays at the Ritz-Carlton when he comes to New York. In the old days we paid $8 a month for a big room down in South Dallas, as comfortable a place as I ever lived in.

Another reporter on the paper at that time was Chester T. Crowell, who later went to New York and became a writer; even in those days he was old enough, or anyway he had sense enough, not to run his legs off on a hot day after some damn fool news story. Still another was Harry Benge Crozier, an exceptionally able political reporter, who at last accounts was back working for the paper again.

The people of the city, from bankers to cops, were very friendly. I was on good terms with old Col. Simpson, the former trail driver who was the dean of the city's bankers, and with Rose Mitchell, who ran the cigar and news counter in the Adolphus for Robert Ellifritz. I was the pal of James J. Collins, the City Attorney, now dead, who once refused to chastise one of his sons because, as he explained, "he's a friend of mine."

And I knew one of the really great spectacles of Texas, ranking well with the Palo Duro Canyon, Medina Lake, the Alamo, and the San Jacinto Battlefield; I refer to Pitchfork Smith, the editor and pamphleteer, who publishes a weekly paper called *The Pitchfork*. Pitch looks somewhat like the late Elbert Hubbard, only more so, and if visitors to the Centennial in Dallas don't see him they can't say they didn't have fair warning.

But I left there seventeen years ago, and perhaps I have no right to pose as an expert on Texas, or even as one very much interested in Texas history. Only the other day I got a letter asking whether, since I had been away from there so long, I could properly be referred to as a "Texas writer."

But I don't see why an absence of a mere seventeen years makes much differ-

ence; all my roots are in Texas, and I expect to go back to the chalk hills when I get ready to stop work, though this is by no means a definite threat.

I have nothing but pity for Americans who don't know the story of Sam Houston (read Marquis James's *The Raven*), or the history of the Texas Rangers (read the excellent book by Professor Walter Prescott Webb) or the history of buried treasure, the brush country and a dozen other matters so conscientiously written about by J. Frank Dobie, the mainstay of the Texas Folklore Society.

The literature dealing with Texas is considerable, and much of it is surprisingly good. Visitors to the Centennial will enjoy themselves more if they look into some of this history and legend so that they will understand something of what they are seeing.

And Texans, too, from what I have observed of them, might also brush up a little. I am always running into young whippersnappers from Texas who can't name four famous Ranger captains, who don't know what Ben Milam did, who can't tell you who Colonel Goodnight was, who don't know what happened to Cynthia Ann Parker—in short, who are downright ignorant. Always I give these young scoundrels a good talking to, though it probably does little good.

Oh, yes, I forgot to tell the only joke I ever heard Grandpa make. We had ox-tail soup one night and the old gentleman observed: "That's going pretty far back on a steer to get something to eat."

The Cactus City Department

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

VOL. 17 NO. 50

MYSTERY OF THE SALTED PICKLES

Short-Weight Puzzled

Lots of people has lots of funny ideas about lots of things. What seems to be pretty smart stuff to theirselfs sometimes don't make sense to nobody else. Like last Wednesday when Bull Billings came stomping into Short-Weight Weston's store with fire in his eye and murder in his heart. He didn't, he allowed, care a whole hell of a lot for the kind of practical jokes which Short-Weight thought up.

Short-Weight was very surprised and hurt, saying that he honestly hadn't been trying to joke Bull about anything, and he inquired what was Bull's reason for thinking so.

"Short-Weight," answers Bull, looking him in the eye very hard and suspicious, "them dill pickles you sold me wasn't just exactly right. They tasted bitter and too damn salty. Also they smelt like the lather off'n a hard-run horse. I sure aim to find out was they damaged accidental or on purpose. Now, Short-Weight, where do you keep yore stock of pickles?"

"Some in that there glass jar," indicates Short-Weight, "but the most of 'em I keep in a barrel in the store room."

Bull stuck a finger into the brine in the jar and tasted it. It seemed all right, so he asks Short-Weight to lead on to the barrel in the store room.

This store room turns out to be part of the livery stable which is next door to Weston's store, which fact seems to add to Bull's growing suspicions, especially when he discovered that horses quartered in the stable could, and frequently did, break into the store room part of the stable.

After Short-Weight points out the pickle barrel setting in the middle of the floor, Bull picks up a stick and commences stirring up the barrel of pickles. Naturally, this was very puzzling to Short-Weight who finally blurts out, "Bull, are you gone plumb loco? What is the big idea of whippin' up that brine that way?"

"The idea is," answers back Bull very cool, "that if there comes up foam on this here brine . . . well, I'm drawin' an' shootin'."

Well, Short-Weight come out alive all right, but he still is plumb mystified by Bull's goings on.

A LESSON FOR GROWING BOYS

It was a very sad thing that the young Harkness boy should get killed the other day. Of course it was accidental, but I hope it will be a lesson to you folks who have growing boys.

It was little Bobby McGonigle who shot the Harkness boy fatally with a .45. And I claim that is a outrage and plain damn foolishness. A .45 is too dang big for a boy who is only ten years old, like Bobby McGonigle. A .38 is a plenty big enough gun for a growing boy to be toting. Of course, after a kid is practically growed up—say twelve years old—why he can handle a .45 without danger of accidents. But in the meantime you parents should be more cautious. When your boy gets big enough to walk and tote a gun, don't give him a .45 to play with. A .38 is plenty big enough.

PERSONALS

Cross-Eye Cronin is fast on the draw and a plenty able hand with a gun, and also he is pretty well known and understood by local folks. But some one of these bright days when he goes on the prod and challenges somebody to go for their gun, why Cross-Eye is going to get hisself shot in the back by a stranger. After all, you can't expect a stranger to be able to figure out whether Cross-Eye is looking at him or at some other gent.

Out to the Six-point Shooting Star and Crescent Dude Ranch a smarty dude sure had some of the starch taken out'n him the other day. This dude went out in the hills to do hisself a little practice shooting with a rifle, and when he comes back, why Pat Bryant, owner of the spread, asks him how he did.

Very smart and boastful, the dude answers back, "Excellent! I got a bull's eye the very first shot."

"Bull's eye, huh?" snorts Pat very sarcastic. "Well, whatever you call it, it is going to cost you fifty dollars. You dudes will have to learn that them bulls is valuable and not to be used for practice shooting."

T-bone Tillie says she almost got married last week to Lop-Ear Lee. But at the last minute she changed her mind, opining that Lop-Ear is a inconstant sort and probably wouldn't love her no more when her hair turns gray.

Well, maybe so, but it appears to me that Lop-Ear has been pretty constant all the while Tillie's hair changed from brunette to blonde to red and back to brunette again.

EDITORIAL

It ain't long now until the Second Annual Cactus County Fair, so I better give you rannyhans a talking to about good sportsmanship.

Last year it was plumb disgraceful the way people acted after the prizes was awarded and give out. There was much bellyaching and accusing for months afterward, with plenty of whispers about "unfair tactics" and "bribery" and other insulting remarks about the judges and those who had won theirselfs blue ribbons.

The stockmen, for instance, was saying that Short-Horn Sholar didn't deserve the blue ribbon for the best beef stock. His stock wasn't fat; they just looked that way account of being fed a lot of dried apples and water just previous to the judging. That, they claim, was very unfair—as well as being dangerous for the spectators within range of the stock.

And the womenfolks! They was even worse. Mrs. Seton claimed that somebody had put alum or saltpeter or something in her jelly to make it bitter, and therefore she didn't win. Mrs. Doane alibied that she was sure that some dishonest creature had tampered with her quilting. In fact, there wasn't a dang one of them female losers but what muttered around for weeks about "feminine wiles" and "undue influence," just because all the ladies who had won blue ribbons was young and pretty.

Now, citizens, such complaining and accusing ain't the proper spirit to enter a Fair with. After all, a Fair ain't held just to prove who has the best beef stock or who can bake the best pies.

So let's see you folks enter into the Fair this year with the proper spirits and understanding. Use your head! And if necessary use force.

Now, don't say you wasn't warned—and may the best man win!

SOCIETY DOINGS

I guess the importantest function of the week was the wedding of Lazy Landon's oldest daughter, Leatrice, to Tight-Fist Tiffany. Maybe it wasn't important to most folks, but it was to Lazy. (And also Leatrice and Tight-Fist.) Anyways, Lazy won't have to move off'n his place now account of not paying the mortgage, as the mortgage is held by Tight-Fist, who now is Lazy's son-in-law.

But about the wedding itself: It was very pretty. When all the guests got assembled, Mrs. Dog-Ear Douglas started things off by singing a solo, after which everybody relaxed as they knew the worst was over.

The next event was Mrs. Seton playing *Nearer My God To Thee* on a mandolin. Some folks thought this was a mite unfitting for a wedding, but it was the only song that Mrs. Seton knew all the way through.

After that was settled, why in walks the bride. I guess she was maybe timid and shy, never having been legally married before in front of a lot of people, because Lazy had to sort of drag her along, arguing under his breath. Lazy hisself looked very elegant with a new haircut and a new pair of suspenders.

All this time, Tight-Fist had been waiting alongside of Deacon Diggs at the other end of the room. He was fidgeting around like a unbroke horse and doing his best to hold a hand over the patch in his Sunday britches. He probably was nervous thinking of the expense, because that is how Tight-Fist's mind runs. Besides buying a ring, he also had to give Deacon Diggs three dollars for doing the technical work. But in the long run, I'd say that Tight-Fist was getting his money's worth.

Anyways, the ceremony finally was over with, making everything legal and satisfactory. The evening ended up with refreshments being served. In fact, folks was having such a good time that they didn't leave until Mrs. Douglas started to sing another solo.

I guess that is about all the details which took place that night. Anyways all that is fit to print.

STIFF IS STOLEN AT DAN SAWYER'S

Undertaker's Dander Up

The thieves who busted into Judd Ovitt's drug store the other night didn't take anything very valuable, Judd reports. Not from the drug store, that is. It was Dan Sawyer who got thieved the worst.

Dan, you know, has his undertaking establishment in the back of Judd's store, and he always keeps on hand a few caskets with silver trimmings in case anybody takes a notion to be buried fancy. It was these silver trimmings that the thieves was after, but they didn't bother to remove same from the caskets. They just took coffins and all. But even worse than that, they also took Bighorn Bohan, who got hisself shot the other day.

Dan had just got Bohan all fixed up and ready to be planted the next day, so you can imagine how disappointed he was when he discovered that the thieves had taken Bohan along with the casket he was in.

And that is just where the thieves got theirselfs into a lot of trouble. Dan says that the law plainly states that a corpse is private property. Also, said corpse must be planted in the ground before the undertaker can get his money for the job. So Dan sure is on the warpath. He says that if the thieves don't return the corpse within forty-eight (48) hours, and before it spoils, why he is going to put the sheriff on their trail.

Hereafter, local thieves had better stick to stealing things which is legal.

TEXAS JACKPOT

By

Eugene Cunningham

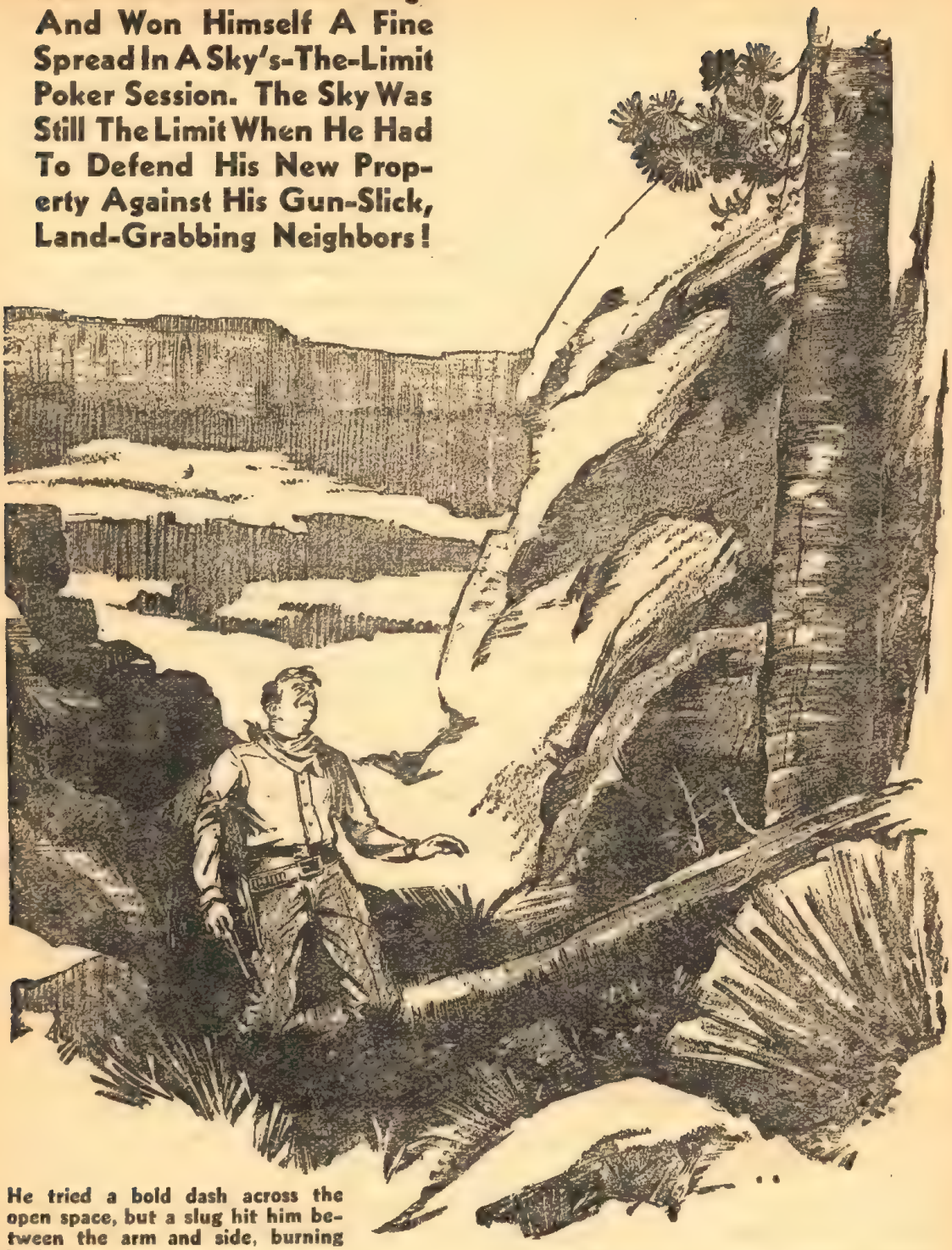
(Author of "Pistol Passport," "Lobo Law," "The Shooting Kid," etc.)

Don Travis shifted his cramped six feet in the chair and looked around the poker table. Outside the First Chance the darkness was changing to pale gray. From the flats about, the railroad carried the mumble of herds gathered for shipment.

Don watched "Streak" riffle the cards for a deal. The tall, gray tinhorn had flashing fingers. But for five hours, since the beginning of this session, he had been very careful to deal and play no more deftly than the non-professionals here. Neither had his partner, the ratty little "Deuces" who sat opposite him on Eth Jernigan's right. Don thought that the experience must constitute some sort of record for the two gamblers. The idea made him grin.

"Streak and Deuces," he told himself, "are probably ready to pop like overstretched suspenders. They'll never forget

Don Travis Held Four Kings And Won Himself A Fine Spread In A Sky's-The-Limit Poker Session. The Sky Was Still The Limit When He Had To Defend His New Property Against His Gun-Slick, Land-Grabbing Neighbors!



He tried a bold dash across the open space, but a slug hit him between the arm and side, burning both . . .

this night in Texadia, when they played with at least three men who knew 'em for crooks and had to play honestly."

Streak was on his right. Eth Jernigan of the Cross J cut the cards for him. Streak dealt, carefully keeping his hands above the table, well in front of him.

Don looked at his cards and tossed them in. Nothing to draw to. Rather idly, he fumbled with the stacks of chips before him. He considered the loose, strained features of "Snake" Fentress on his left at the table end. Snake was the heavy loser, as Don and Ull Unit of the U Up and

Down were the two players ahead.

"Wonder what kind of outfit the Snake is," thought Don. "Fentress has lost a big slice of his herd, tonight. IOUs all around the table. Even Texadia has been a long while waiting for a game as big as this."

He, it came to him, was the freak of the occasion. For he had landed in Texadia at dusk owning three silver dollars, no more than a tramp cowboy heading for home in the Red Rock River country. A lucky whirl at faro had given him a poker stake of nearly two hundred. Now, he had between five and six thousand before him.

Old Eth Jernigan tossed his hand in and yawned. He grinned at Don and fumbled for a cheroot; lighted it.

"Funny," Jernigan said humorously, "I seen you in Driggs City it must have been that week when I shipped a herd from up there. But I never seen you gamble."

"I was city marshal of Driggs," Don told him. "I never bucked any stripe of tiger while I held the job. It took all my time to ride herd on the ones that did gamble. No, I never took a drink or touched a chip that six months, and still quit, when the sporting crowd won the election, fifteen hundred in the hole."

The game had settled, now, into a duel between Streak and grizzled Ull Unit. Ull won with a flush and raked in the pot. He grinned at Don, then at Streak.

"Does me good to win off Streak and Deuces," he said. "I bet you there's chips in these pots we been winning, Don, could show about every iron in this part of Texas. Our two—uh—*friends* been piling up right smart of a rep' for cleaning cowmen."

"Have to say one thing for 'em, though," remarked Don gravely, "they are two of the straightest players and best losers you would want to meet. I think we ought to write 'em out some sort of testimonial when the game's over."

Eth Jernigan and Ull Unit guffawed. Streak grinned wolfishly. Little Deuces' ratty eyes came venomonusly to Don and shifted again. But Snake Fentress snarled impatiently. He was like a man possessed. His eyes shone feverishly; his loose mouth jerked; his gnarled fingers twitched.

"Come on! Come on and deal!" he told Don. "I got a feeling Old Lady Luck is on my shoulder. About time, too! I never seen such a run of cards in thirty years. Come on, deal!"

As Don shuffled the cards he considered the owner of the Snake. Evidently, Fentress was known to both Jernigan and Unit. They seemed neither to like nor dislike the Snake man. But they had been willing to accept his IOUs and to Don, a stranger in the shipping town, that had been enough. He had gathered that Fentress' outfit was somewhere north of Texadia in the Snake Hills country; a small, but sufficiently prosperous spread.

He dealt and the cards were generally poor. Fentress won in a showdown with Eth Jernigan and pulled in forty-odd dollars. Then he picked up the deck and his hands shook so that he could hardly shuffle the cards. His deal was sloppy.

Ull Unit opened for a blue chip. Deuces and Jernigan stayed. Streak raised a half-dozen blues. Don turned in his chair and frowned at the tinhorn. Then, with sudden jerk of mouth corners, he pushed in chips.

"See that and raise it ten!" he grunted.

"Trying to run me out, huh?" Snake Fentress cried. "Well, this is one time you cain't quite git there! Up twenty! You fellows kind of been chousing me around. But here's where the snake bites you."

"It ain't really good poker," Ull Unit said slowly, "but I do believe in crowding my luck. I'll see all that."

"Not for me!" Deuces announced. "Me and Moses are out in the bullrushers."

"I'll watch, too," Jernigan shrugged, dropping his hand.

Streak pushed in chips. Don turned again to regard the tinhorn frowningly. He shook his head and stared at his hand . . . four kings and the eight of clubs.

"There's a chance," he muttered. "A damn' good chance. . . ."

He moved chips and continued to frown and glance from man to man of the players.

"All right!" Fentress cried. "Cards for you gamblers. You better draw deep. It's going to take a hand to scoop this one."

"One," Ull Unit grunted. "I wouldn't fool you: Mate up with either pair I got and I'll call you off the cross."

"Two for me," Streak said evenly, but with a pulse showing in his throat. "Don't let 'em be strangers, either."

"One could maybe help a cowboy in my shape," Don drawled.

"Dealer's pat!" Snake Fentress told them huskily. "What you doing, Unit? You opened."

"Check!" Unit shrugged. "First loud noise I hear, I reckon I'll bust down the timber leaving."

"About ten blues," Streak said smoothly.

"And about four stacks on top of that," grunted Don. "I am not usually a suspicious soul, but I somehow smell deceitfulness around me."

"And I'll boost that!" Fentress almost gasped. "As I remember, this is no-limit. All right!"

"See you-all some more—but not right now," Unit grinned, dropping his hand. "Well, Streak, how you feel, gambolier?"

Streak scowled but, catching the worried crease between Don's brows, began to push out chips.

"I ain't running! I can hang and rattle. . ."

"And-uh," Don drawled. "Some more on top of the serpent's neck. Don't hang around if you can't stand the climate."

"Wait a minute, now! Wait a minute!" Fentress cried. "I want to boost that and I ain't got the chips. Unit! Jernigan! How about it? You-all know my spread. One of you take another IOU? Five hundred?"

The two cowmen looked at each other. Then Ull Unit let a narrowed eye rove about the table.

"Travis has got most of your IOU's" he said slowly. "Streak has got one for a couple hundred. I got two for a thousand altogether. Let's figure a minute. . . You would just about clean yourself, Fentress, if you lost this hand. You willing?"

"I reckon I know what I'm doing!" snarled Fentress. "I ain't no kid! When I play poker I play. If I lose, I pay off. It's my business. The outfit's worth this bunch of paper and five hundred, only I ain't going to lose this hand."

"Write it off, then," the U Up and Down owner told him, shrugging. "But if you lose, you sure as hell lose the Snake!"

He accepted the scrawled paper and shoved out chips. Fentress sent them cascading into the pot and Streak, mouth a thin line like a crayon streak across his face, almost bared the table before him when he saw the raise.

Don was no longer frowning. Imperturbably he moved five hundred dollars to the center and flicked a match on his thumbnail.

"Aces full on queens!" Fentress yelled.

"Beats!" Streak admitted sullenly. "I figured you for a big straight or a little flush—you been playing 'em crazy all night. You. . ."

He stared at Don's four kings and stiffened. Fentress made a strangling sound and slumped in his chair.

"I— I— That's the biggest hand tonight," he mumbled. "I— I reckon I'm cleaned out. . . I'll fix up a bill of sale. . ."

He got shakily up from the table and went through the thin crowd of cowboys

and townsmen still at the games behind them.

"I'll cash us in," Streak said in a low voice. "Damnedest run of luck I had in twenty year. Count your chips."

When they were taking gold from him, he held up the IOU for two hundred dollars and looked inquiringly at Ull Unit and Don.

"You men got the rest of the Snake. How about cashing this for me? I can use the money and I don't want no cows."

"All right," Don nodded. "I'll take it."

"I got a thousand, too," Ull Unit said carelessly. "And I got about all the outfit I can handle, in the U Up and Down. It seems like to me, young fellow, you ought to handle the Snake on your lone. You can make a go of the place. . ."

It seemed to Don that he caught a play of eyes between Eth Jernigan and Ull Unit. But when he looked from one to the other of them, both old faces were blank.

"What's wrong with this Snake outfit?" he asked Unit. "How come you want to climb out from under a share in it?"

"Wrong with it?" Unit cried. He faced Don with eyes innocently wide. "Wrong with the Snake? Why, nothing in the world is wrong with it. One of the nicest, prettiest li'l' outfits in Texas! Good range, nice li'l' bunch of cattle, good water. . . Even old Snake for a neighbor, his daughter's got a li'l' homestead adjoining that she runs hawses on and I reckon Snake'll live with Helen till he builds him another stake."

"All right," Don agreed. "I'll take up the thousand. I reckon that still leaves me better than a thousand in cash."

Snake Fentress came shambling back from the bar. He had a thin sheaf of papers. He sat down and set an ink bottle and pen on the table.

"Make the transfer papers to Don Travis," Ull Unit said with a twinkle in faded eyes. "He's taking it all on, Snake."

"This is everything on it," Fentress told Don. "I been keeping everything here in the First Chance safe. Kind of figured on selling the place, anyway. You can have her registered up after things open later in the day. . ."

Unit and Jernigan signed and Fentress mumbled something, then shambled away. Don leaned back.

"I won it on four kings," he said thoughtfully. "So I think I'll change the brand to KKKK. Four K. . ."

Eth Jernigan was standing, stretching.

"About time to eat and git around," he said. "Yeh, it'll be a good brand, Don. And changing from the Snake might change things, some. Yeh. . . *might!*"

CHAPTER II

The Five Oslins

Don stared after Jernigan's retreating back, then put out a hand quickly and caught Ull Unit as the U Up and Down owner was sliding away from the table.

"Wait a minute, Mister Unit!" grinned Travis, "what kind of business is this, a fine, upstanding cowman, gray-haired, too, and with a noble face, taking advantage of a young innocent like me? What's the story of this Snake outfit that I seem to own? Come on, now, be a Christian and tell me what I bought for those four pretty kings I had pat?"

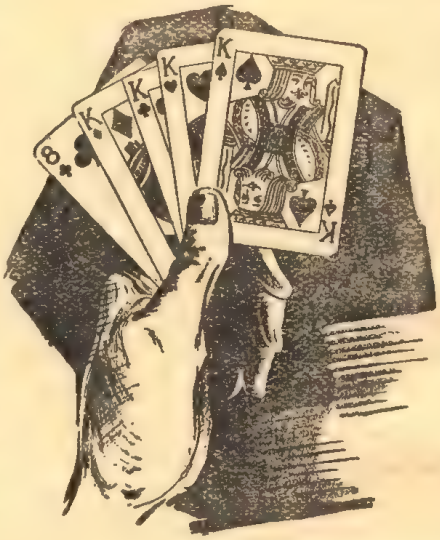
Streak and Deuces had been looking with sad resignation, one at the other. Now, turning toward the bar-side of the First Chance, they seemed to go rigid. Don noticed the stiffening. He looked that way but saw only five normally hard-faced and shabby cowboys standing. He looked at Ull Unit again and was surprised to see the same rigidity in Unit.

"The Oslins," Ull Unit mumbled. "Uh

—I got to see a fellow about my steers. I'll see you after while, son!"

Deftly, he freed his sleeve from Don's fingers and somehow managed to vanish between tables. Don looked around for explanation of this nervousness. Streak and Deuces were walking fast toward the back of the big room. Toward him, coming in a line, the five cowboys walked with heads shuttling to right and left as if they were searching for something.

"Well," Don told himself, "without knowing a blessed thing about it, this begins to look interesting."



HE turned his chair and propped it back against the table. He watched the advancing march of the Oslins calmly. But his cigarette was held in left hand. His right hand was hooked in the sagging shell belt that held up a walnut-handled .44 Colt.

A stocky red-head in the center of the line faced him. He had murky dark eyes, but so had the red-head on his left.

"Seen Snake Fentress?" he snarled, then waited when Don nodded silently.

"Talk up!" he snarled again.

Don lifted left hand, set thumb against his ear and wiggled the fingers. He lowered the hand to touch his lips, then repeated the finger-wiggling. The red-head scowled at him.

"Must be a damn' dummy," the other red-head volunteered. "I don't see the old son nowhere, Tick."

Don had looked thoughtfully along the line of them. Two red-heads, both as ugly as sidewinder rattlers, a blond boy of nineteen or twenty who seemed to wait for the others to lead, and on each end of the line a cowboy of most average appearance except for surly expressions. . . He wondered if this were a family or an outfit.

"You deef and dumb?" Tick suddenly demanded.

"Uh-uh," Don denied. "Stranger."

"Huh?" Tick and the other red-head demanded, together. "You ain't deef and dumb? Then," this was Tick, alone, "what's the idee in flapping your fingers like that?"

"Keeps 'em limber," Don told him. "Left hand's never limber as the right. Because you don't use it as much. You looking for Snake Fentress?"

The five of them regarded him steadily, but with varying expressions. Tick and the other red-head were glaring; the two cowboys seemed a little puzzled; the blond youngster looked on the edge of a friendly grin.

"We're looking for Snake Fentress, yeh!" Tick told him, hunching. "And if you know where he is. . ."

"He was playing poker with a bunch of us, all night. But when he got cleaned it seemed to sort of discourage him. Lots of pokerologists are like that. They want to win all the time. Anyhow, Snake lost his whole spread. . ."

"Lost the Snake?" the second red-head grunted, gaping at him. "Who won it off the old illegitimate?"

"I won some and Ull Unit got the rest."

"Ull Unit!" Tick snarled. "That old swayback'll wish to hell he'd stuck to cash for his blue chips! He. . ."

"But I bought Ull's share from him," Don interrupted evenly. "I hear it's quite

an outfit. And I'm a tolerable cowman. Don't let my big, blue eyes deceive you. I really do know a cow from a critter. And if you don't mind, I would sort of like to hear all the lowdown on what's behind this business. I'd like to know what difference it makes to you, who owns the Snake."

Tick Oslin seemed to draw a long breath. He leaned forward and there was in his murky eyes a light that the experienced Don had seen many times and instantly recognized, the killer light. He shifted the barest trifle in his chair and waited.

"Listen, you!" Tick told him raspingly. "You' going to be one of them strangers that never gits a chance to git acquainted, if you try running the Snake outfit. My name's Tick Oslin, and us Oslins, me and Hall and Bob, and our hands, here, we run the Rocking O on the Snake south line.

"You can try bucking us, if you want to. But yesterday me and Hall made up our minds to something: There ain't going to *be* no Snake outfit from now on! You' winning the Snake off Fentress don't mean a thing. If you got the sense of ary old, gray goose, you'll climb aboard your hawse and you'll split the breeze. . ."

"I never did have a lick of sense," Don stopped him, grinning. "Just built that way, I reckon. I was raised down around Uvalde—King Fisher's country, you know. Couldn't even read and write until Bull Durham started giving away Shakespeare with sacks of tobacco. Only thing I could do was make my mark—like this. . ."

His right hand flicked up, a good deal like a rattler's head striking, and went under his blue chambray shirt. As a sort of tail-jerk to that lightning motion the Colt from his waistband roared and one of the oil lamps of the First Chance exploded with a jangling sound of smashed tin and shattered glass.

Gravely, Don regarded the tiny wisp of smoke that wreathed from the .44 muzzle. That muzzle was trained steadily upon the middle of Tick Oslin and Tick's dark eyes were fascinatedly upon it. Don seemed not to notice.

"I won the Snake outfit fair and square, if I did win off a damn' fool that can't tell one hand from another," Don informed them generally. "I hit Texadia flat-broke. Now, I'm what you might call a prominent cowman of the country. It's my intention to run the outfit until something stops me. I hope nobody feels slighted if I say that *I* don't see a thing to stop me. . . But, I will add to that something else. . ."

He lifted steely eyes to regard Tick and Hall and Bob Oslin, ignoring their two hands, who were watching blankly.

"I am willing to be a good neighbor. So, if you have got a grievance against the Snake, I'd like to hear it, before I change that brand to the KKKK and start *any* kind of a war."

"You'll find out damn' quick what's going to happen, and that'll be plenty for you!" Tick snarled. "Now. . ."

"You!" Don said sharply to one of the men in line. "You make a motion toward that cutter of yours and I'll blow you in two between your mind and your mouth. This happens to be dealer's choice and I'm dealing!"

The hard-faced man on Tick Oslin's left let his hand drop hurriedly away from his pistol. Don stood, coming erect in a tigerish straightening of lean six feet.

"All right, then!" he said in a tone different from any he had used. "You think you want trouble. You don't want to put the cards on the table and let me know what's what. *Bueno!* I never hunted a row or dodged one in my life. You come smoking it, any time you feel like that. On the KKKK or right here. I'll be in the neighborhood, don't you worry. May-

be I'll still be here after the bunch of you has started tickling the li'l' bitsy daisies with your noses."

The slap of the Colt, as it was tossed from right hand to left and back again, made loud sound in the now quiet barroom. One by one, Don looked the Oslin crowd up and down. Before he or they could speak, the laziest of drawls lifted, near one of the cottonwood pillars that supported the First Chance roof:

"Don Travis or Q-Quintus Patman, one of us two. I dunno what the row is but that won't put no brake what-the-ever on my shooting finger. If it's good enough for Don Travis, it's plenty good for one other Uvalde man. Which is me, Q Patman."

The Rocking O men turned a little, to face the fat man in brown ducks who leaned so wearily against the pillar. Quintus Patman stood with arms folded. Over each thick arm peeped the muzzle of a Colt. His lids sagged over green eyes and but for the pistols he held one might have thought him half-asleep.

"And that's that!" Don told the Oslins briskly. "Come to see us with a nosegay and we'll fall on your shoulders and call you sweet names. Bring the Winchesters and we'll fall on your necks—yeh! just like a brick smokehouse dropping."

He stood watching the stiff retreat of the quintet. Only when they had disappeared did he move with two racing strides, to catch the fat man and whirl him about the rough floor.

"Le' me go, you damn' nitwit!" Q yelled at last. "I don't want you shot accidental! Turn me loose!"

"Q-Quintus Patman!" Don chanted, head on one side. "I swear, I dunno whatever I'd want to see you again for, but I find I'm glad. No explaining tastes, I reckon. Where the hell you been, all this time? My goodness! Must be five years since I left you in the sticky arms of that widow in Valentine. Don't tell me she's here with you, keeping you on the water and out of sin? Don't tell me that, Q-Quintus. I couldn't bear it!"

"Widow, nothing! She was like one of them black widow spiders; the kind that eat their husbands. But I got me a divorce directly I found out how many husbands she'd practically et up. I been riding all over, since then. What's this I heard, months back, about you forsakening respectability and getting to be a damn' city marshal? You know I can't stomach a marshal!"

"Ne' mind! Ne' mind all that! I have just got up from a pokering session and, well, I reckon you know the rest. You saw the Oslin crowd making their tomahawk-talk."

"I dunno a thing about it. I just happened to walk in the joint a minute ago and looked across and there you was. Then I noticed this bunch and I stepped in, way I always have to do, to keep that pretty face of yours pretty. Who's the Oslins?"

"Search me! Except they neighbor on the south line of my Ks. You see, it was like this. . ."

Briefly, he told the story of the poker game and went behind it to explain the loss of his job in Driggs City. Q Patman nodded at the end.

"There's an old, old saying about what you don't know can't hurt you," he remarked sagely. "Don, my son, if that's even a li'l' bit true, nothing can hurt us. Because *we* don't know a dern thing about a dern thing. We don't even know what day it is! But I do know what time it is: It's breakfast!"

They ate in a Chinese restaurant near the shipping pens. It was plain that word of the poker game, and of Don's part in the affair, had become a well-published matter in Texadia. Cowboys and buyers and cattlemen and townsmen in general looked curiously at him. One or two stopped at

the table to remind Don that they had known him in Driggs City. Two borrowed money from him. But at last they were the only ones left in the place.

"I was heading back for River," Don told his ancient friend. "Thought I'd ask old Wird Hendee if he still needed a riding manager. But this sashay changes everything. I like this part of Texas better, even, than the Walking H range. And when Lady Luck drops a cow-outfit down on your lap and says, 'Honey, she's all yours because I plumb love you'— What's it? What you goggling about?"

He turned so as to face the door of the long, narrow room. Down past the counter a girl was walking. She was tall, but not too tall; before he saw the color of her hair and eyes Don remarked the way her scarlet shirt, silvery breeches and inlaid halfboots fit and became her. Then he noted the smooth ripple of her dark hair and the flash of dark eyes.

"Are you the man who won the Snake?" she asked evenly.

CHAPTER III

A Killing Overdue

Don got swiftly to his feet and bowed. Q Patman worried his chair back and also stood.

"I reckon I'm the guilty party," Don told her. "All in all, I reckon I put up eight thousand against it, one time or other. I— You're not Fentress' daughter, Miss Helen? Then. . ."

Her hand jerked. He moved, but not fast enough to avoid the slash of her quirt. It caught him on the neck and burned like fire; burned like the bullet that once had left a scar in the same place.

Then he caught her wrist and for an instant they stood close together, so that her furious face was all but against his chambray shirt. He held her motionless, merely putting pressure on her wrist until she was forced to drop the quirt. Then he turned her and she dropped, in spite of her struggle, into the chair Q had vacated.

"Take it easy," advised Don. "I can understand how you feel, even if I don't appreciate the way you act."

"You—You—" she began, stammeringly. "You'll find you've got more on your hands than you guessed, when you tolled Pa into that crooked game of yours! *He* might have handled it, if he had been left alone, but you never will . . . not you, or any of your card-sharping kind!

"But the Oslins don't play with cards. They play with shells! Winchester shells and Colt shells! You'll have a lot of trouble dealing from the bottom with them. I haven't got a bit of use for anything with a Rocking O iron on it, but I could be pleased to death, this morning, that the Oslins are on the Snake south line! I . . ."

"You're the one that's not fair!" Don said quietly. "You don't know a thing about this game . . . how it started, how it was played, or even who was playing. But you jump me because I won. . . ."

"I don't know? I don't know Streak Iler and Deuces Mulhall? I wasn't brought up in this country, I suppose! Not fair? Every man in Texadia County or for fifty miles around knows that Pa is no match for any kind of slicker. . . ."

"And yet," Don persisted patiently, "it was a fair game. Ull Unit and Eth Jernigan were playing in it. Ull won, the same as I did. Streak and Deuces, between 'em, didn't break even. I was heavy winner. Ull Unit was next. I . . ."

"They didn't have to win!" she cried furiously. "Their play was to back you for their share. They . . ."

From the street came the dull, flat sound of a shot, followed quickly by another and a third and fourth. The three at the table turned in spite of themselves, to

stare at the doorway. Out from the counter the wispy Chinese proprietor trotted. He went to the door and looked out. A man ran past and flung a word to the Chinese; said something as he went out of sight.

"Missy!" the Chinese cried, whirling. "Oh, Missy Helen! Snake . . . him git kill. Oslin man kill him!"

The girl came up from her chair with a jerk that almost upset the table. She ran up the room and vanished through the door. Don and Q regarded each other frowningly, then Don shrugged and indicated the door with jerk of head.

"Looks like we have got off to a good start," he said grimly. "With the old man out of the way, there's not a thing left on the range between the Oslin guns and the seat of our pants!"

They crowded past the little Chinese and walked up to the group gathering around Snake Fentress. The five Rocking O men were only two now. Tick Oslin and the other red-head—this was Hall Oslin, Don discovered quickly from the talk about him—stood talking to a man who wore a sheriff's star.

"You know damn' well it's been shoot on sight," Tick was saying to the sheriff. "Snake knowed it and so did we. That was even before we found out how him and Juan Cosca and Sye Redus stole fifty head of Long Twos off our east range and sold 'em. If you want to know, we caught up with Cosca day before yesterday and he told us the whole tale. We would have drug him in but—he tried to git away yesterday and we had to shoot him. Today, Snake seen us first and he went for his gun. Plenty seen that. We got a dozen witnesses. . . ."

"That's so!" an eager chorus verified Tick's claim. "We seen it all, Sher'f. Soon as Snake seen Tick and Hall, he went for his cutter and they went for theirs and there he is!"

Don looked down at the silent girl, who sat in the dust of the street with Snake's head in her lap. The sheriff shrugged hopelessly.

"Looks like it was open and shut," he told Tick Oslin. "I reckon we better go down and see the justice and git this inquest over. But I do wish you Snake Hills folks'd settle your rows out in the hills so's I wouldn't have to bother about 'em!"

He moved to bend over the girl and gently lift her. Don watched with set face while men carried her father into a store and the sheriff went off with Tick and Hall Oslin. Then he turned to Q Patman and whistled almost soundlessly. Q waited.

"The general store ought to be the place to find out about our new property," Don told him drawlingly. "We'll grab us a handful of supplies and as much information as we can get for a *peló* and take a *pasear* out to the Snake Hills."

Newcomb, the lank, white-haired storekeeper, regarded them thoughtfully from wise old blue eyes and shook his head forebodingly when Don asked about the Snake.

"I don't know much," he said. "I been right here since before the railroad come. I named the town. I knowed the Willises twenty year before Fentress married Helen's ma and settled down to fence off what's the Snake outfit, now. And still I don't know a lot about the place.

"Them Oslins come in ten year back. Old Tick was killed right here in the street by a Mexican that he'd quirted on the ranch. There's the three boys left, Tick and Hall and Bob. They got two tough hands, Glenn Kilcress and Pres Spofford. And far back's I can recollect there's been trouble. Tick did kind of spark around Helen Fentress and when she put her quirt across his face it kind of made things worse."

"She's pretty good with that quirt," remarked Don dryly. "But you don't know

of anything special that would keep the Oslin tribe in their warpaint?"

"I did hear that Tick Oslin claims Snake and two used-to-be Snake hands stuck to fifty head of Long Twos not long back," Newcomb admitted cautiously. "But I don't know the straight of it and I— Well, I just don't know. About your groceries. . . ."

Don leaned upon the counter and grinned at the old man:

"Mr. Newcomb," he said in a confidential tone, "knowing the country the way you do, suppose I was to tell you that all this sort of bothers me and so I'd like to rid myself of the Snake? What would you offer me for the outfit?"

"Not a dollar!" Orval Newcomb told him emphatically. "No siree! Not with that bunch of killers on your south line!"

"Fine!" grunted Don, straightening with a tight grin. "I am glad of that. For if you'd offered me twice the value of the place I would have felt foolish in turning you down. Felt like a plumb nitwit at turning you down. Yet I'd have done it!"

"He would have had to turn down even three times what the place might be worth," Q Patman explained gravely to the frowning, bewildered old storekeeper. "He's just that kind of damn' nitwit. And the worst of it all, Mr. Newcomb, is how he can take a man like me, smarter and better looking than he'll ever be, and make me act like the same kind of *tonto* he is! I don't know a thing sadder in the whole state."

"Uh—I reckon," Newcomb said vaguely. "Now, about these groceries: I'll have a wagon coming by in a few days. You can give the driver your order and I'll send it out when he goes back."

They took bacon and coffee and sugar and flour and packed them on their horses. As they rode past the First Chance Q Patman was attacked by coughing. Don turned grimly in the saddle.

"All right! All right!" he said. "Go in and buy a couple of quarts. I know that cough of yours. In fact, I'll go in with you to see that you get out again."

"Yah!" Q scoffed. "You couldn't pass the last snakebite cure in the town to save your soul! Who was it, seven year back last Christmas Eve in Del Rio, that took charge of the Blue Elephant and tended bar and bust' out crying because a harnessmaker's hawse was left out in the cold world?"

There were few drinkers in the First Chance, now. But at the far end of the bar an enormously tall man stood staring gloomily at his whisky. He seemed deaf to all about him but when the bartender set out the quarts required for Don and Q and congratulated Travis on winning the Snake, the tall man turned bodily to stare at them. His eyes were like ink pools, liquidly dark in a tanned face. He straightened and came at oddly noiseless step down to where they were drinking.

"My name's Borland," he told Don. "Smoky Borland is the go-by. I'm top hand in this neck of the woods. You need a man and I need a job. I hear the books call that kind of thing a coincidence. Anyway, you don't have a man on the Snake today. Juan Bigmouth Cosca is dead as Pharaoh's bay chariot horse. Sye Redus split the breeze when he found out the Oslins had found out about that bunch of cows Snake had had him rustle."

"I've heard about those coincidence things, too," Don said slowly, looking him up and down. "But none of 'em even begun to be as big as you are. What would you figure wages?"

"You couldn't pay me what I'll be worth," Smoky Borland shrugged. "Nobody could. I don't even know, myself, what I'm really worth. But if you can stand forty a month. . . ."

"You really know this country?"

"I know who poked the dimples out and

made 'em into hills. I know where Snake Fentress stole his first calf. I even know when to shoot and when not to."

"You're hired, then. Have one on the Ks. The Snake's a dead outfit, now. Then collect your elephant and come along with us."

They drank and Don, catching Q's eyes on the recruit, lifted tawny brows. Q nodded in what seemed agreement with Don's opinion of Smoky.

"Snake had a killing overdue for a long time," Smoky said thoughtfully. "He'd carried on a feud with the Oslins for years. Both sides had been mavericking every chance they got. You see, I worked for the Cross J and the U Up and Down and, well, for just about every outfit in the country *but* the Snake and the Rocking O. I have done a lot of quiet riding and what you can see from a hill is sometimes downright funny. I'm not a talking man, special. So what I have sighted I kept to myself. I have got an *awful* big back; man could hardly miss me shooting at it. . . ."

"I ought to tell you in advance that the Oslins think their feud goes on just the same, even in spite of the Snake's change of name and ownership."

"Yeh, I know," Smoky admitted, pouring himself another drink. "It's just one of those things the pore cowhand has got to put up with; something he takes like pore cooking. And that bunch is hell on striped wheels. Tick is about as previous a proposition with a six-shooter as even I ever sighted. Hall is just a shade slower. Bob don't count; he's just a easy-going kid that trails along. Kilcress and Spofford are right up in Tick's class on triggernometry. Four . . . and three of us. . . ."

He straightened, sighing. Don, in no way deceived by the gloominess of his hand's words and manners, grinned at Q.

"It has got to be quality," he said. "They have got quantity on us. Well, let's go take charge of our troubles!"

They left Smoky at the First Chance door and mounted. As they foxtrotted out of town, past the shipping pens where herds bawled, and in dust and apparent confusion men were hazy shapes unrecognizable, someone yelled at Don.

"Hey," Ull Unit addressed him from a rail, "hear you offered to sell out to Orval Newcomb a while back. What's the price?"

Don pulled in below him and grinned up at the shrewd old face. Unit drew in smoke from his cornhusk cigarette.

"Uh, that's a right nice homestead Helen's got on your east line," he drawled. "She raises some of the best hawses we see in all this country, half-bloods. Ought to think about her place. . . ."

"Think she'll sell out—to me?" Don asked, grin widening.

"Well, other ways of gitting homesteads," Ull told him.

CHAPTER IV
Snake Hills Vengeance

Smoky Borland had told barest truth when saying that he knew the Snake Hills country. By stock trails that led across ridges and down into arroyos and up into wooded hills again, he led the strangers deep into the range that had been Fentress's.

And as the big brown horse chunked ahead of Don's rangy black, and Q's flashy pinto, he told them of the Oslins and old Yancey Willis who had been Snake Fentress' father-in-law, Helen Fentress' grim grandsire.

They heard of duels fought in these hills between lone cowboys of the U Up and Down, Cross J, YT and Rocking O. At last, this was near noon and they were lying by a tiny spring high in the Snakes, Q rolled over and flipped his cigarette stub away and regarded Smoky solemnly:

"You're too big a man to call a liar, ex-

cept over a Winchester barrel," he drawled. "So, I'll just ask you: Is all this tale of blood and tombstones true? All of it?"

"I ain't told you the half of it!" Smoky declared. "This is non-doubtedly the fightin'est part of Texas. And there's a itch at the back of my neck that tells me we're going to have more and a lot more of the same. If I had ary lick of sense, I'd be back in the First Chance right now, bumming drinks off cowboys."

"No doubt, then," Don asked slowly, from where he lay with hand splashing water in the little basin of the spring, "that old Snake had rustled Rocking O stuff?"

"No more doubt than that the devil's a fire-eater! He was a slick old son; regular Injun in the open. He could lift a herd of cows and you'd figure b'god the critters must've sprouted li'l' wings and just flew off."

"Then, how will I know what on the place is really mine and what was put here with a sticky loop? Was he a good blotter?"

"One of the best in the world, unless you want to believe Ull Unit. Ull claimed Snake was the best!"

Don groaned cavernously and sat up to build a cigarette.

"That makes it hard on me. I was raised honest. I want to run the Ks honest. If I could know what Rocking O and U Up and Down and Cross J stuff was on my range, I'd drift it back. But if he's got it blotted smooth I don't know what to do!"

They had finished a lunch of fried bacon and canned beans and damson plums. They mounted and rode again over a course that, Smoky informed them, would lead eventually to the high, yellow cut-stone house of the Snake. Four miles, about, they had made from the spring when a height above them blossomed with powder smoke and the hills rang with the sound of sheets of glass breaking as shots echoed and re-echoed all around.

Their salvation was the eagerness of those who bushwhacked them. They saw the lead kick up tiny geysers of dust well in advance of the horses. Then they had split and were riding hell-for-leather in three directions toward cover.

Don got his carbine out as he swung down from Coaly. He inched up behind a boulder and watched the butte from which the shots had come. There was no sign, now, of the dry-gulchers; no sound. He watched intently. Oslins, of course; there would be no others in this country who held a grudge against him.

"A killing grudge!" he amended that, suddenly, with recollection of Helen Fenstress' lovely, set face. "She thinks I'm a damn' card-shark and ought to have my throat cut. Funny. . . . In all the miles of riding, from Uvalde up to Montana and back again to here, I never happened upon one like her. If I had happened to ride by the Snake, or her homestead, and I'd seen her, probably I would have hunkered right down and said: Let's get acquainted! Now. . . ."

He saw movement at the end of the butte. It was a man afoot, working down through the brush. He estimated the range and shifted his sights, then waited. There was no sign of Q and Smoky. But he knew that the two were quite capable of handling their share, when they saw something at which to shoot. Perhaps they, also, had noted the tiny ripple of bushes which he was watching. If so, the moment that Oslin warrior exposed himself, there would be shooting. If Q did it, the shooting would be unusual. . . .

"There ought to be law against it!" he told himself while he watched. "A man that can't play poker has got no business getting into a game with men who can. Not when he's really losing something that belongs to—to a daughter. Hell! Nobody

could blame her for feeling the way she does. She makes me feel like a damn' thief; like I robbed her . . ."

He began to fire with a sort of deliberate speed, lacing the brush about the patch of blue that had showed. A man stood in the bushes. With odd likeness to one stretching wearily, he raised his hands above his head, then fell forward and began to roll. For no reason, Don suddenly recalled that one of the Rocking O hands, a tall, vicious looking cowboy, had worn a new, blue shirt, that dawning in the First Chance.

"Kilcress or Spofford," he said to himself. "And there go my young gladiators! But what they're riddling, *I* don't see!"

From where Smoky had ambushed himself, vision was evidently better. He yelled triumphantly and Don got cautiously up.

"They got plenty! They're high-tailing it, Don! Git one?"

Presently, Don could see four riders disappearing over a far ridge. The three of them got their horses and rode to the butte. Smoky looked at the dead man.

"Pres Spofford. . . . That was a nice, long shot, Don. We maybe hit one of the others bad. What do we do with Pres?"

"Tie him in his saddle and let his horse take him back to the Rocking O," decided Don. "The sheriff said he wanted us to settle Snake Hills affairs in the Snake Hills. All right, we will!"

When that grisly bit of work was finished and the gray horse had walked off into the south, Don looked grimly at his companions, who seemed to wait for his word. He thought carefully before speaking to the latter.

"I don't want a head of stock that's not branded Snake—and branded straight and clean, at that," he said. "If the Oslins had come to me and said there had been rustling done and some of the Rocking O stuff was probably on the Snake, I would have told 'em to come on over and look around and chase every Rocking O dogie back over the line. But they wouldn't do that. They tried to run it over me in the First Chance. Now, they've tried to rub us out. So they can have all the war they can handle. I'm not going to be razzle-dazzled by anybody."

"Make out your will, Smoky," Q grunted. "I have suffered from this hairpin it must be twenty-odd year, now. When he sets his head and bows his neck, ain't a bit of use arguing. Even," he looked sidelong at Don, then at Smoky, "if there wasn't a homesteader raising cute li'l' hawses on the line of the Snake."

He spurred furiously ahead before Don could draw breath for answer. They rode until mid-afternoon and then, from the crest of a jagged range of the Snake Hills, Smoky pointed out the creek-watered flat upon which was the tall, narrow house of the Snake. Don surveyed his empire.

"It's a sightly place," he thought. "That house and that grove of trees; the shine of the water across the flat . . . It's the kind of place to live in. . . . I don't blame her a bit for hating the man she thinks swindled her out of it! Not a bit!"

"Somebody!" Q grunted, and pointed.

"Woman," Smoky amplified the statement. "Tell by the way she rides. Reckon that's Helen Fentress. Couldn't be anybody else, on the Snake. The Ks. . . ."

"Wait for me!" Don told them abruptly, on impulse.

He sent Coaly plunging down a slope and into an arroyo that led generally in the direction to intersect the course of that slender, red-shirted rider.

He rode faster and was waiting for her in the open east of the house. She did not see him; she was carrying a large picture and her chestnut liked the strange burden not at all. She had all she could do to keep him going straight ahead.

The chestnut stopped and snorted at sight of Coaly. She looked around the picture curiously. Then, with recognition of Don, her face hardened and she gathered up the reins.

"I wanted to tell you," said Don quietly, "how sorry I am about . . . your father. It does seem pretty hard lines when you lose . . . a ranch and lose him, too, the same day."

"I don't need your sympathy," she flared. "I don't need anything from you! You're much more apt to need a lot of things!"

He pushed into the chestnut's path when she was going on.

"I think you're going to have to listen to me a while longer. I know you think I gulled your father; that the poker was a crooked racket to skin him out of the Snake. The fact that it happens not to be true hasn't a thing to do with it, if you think it was a skinning. But you look like a nice girl, like one who'd want to be fair about everything. Won't you let me tell you?"

"I don't want to hear a word out of you! I think any man who can make his living hoodling cowmen must have a smooth tongue. I don't see why you'd be any different from other sharpers."

He still blocked her path. Something made him furious. It was not her saying that he was crooked, not exactly. He still told himself that he couldn't blame her for believing that. It was . . . He mulled it over quickly while he watched her angry, suspicious face. He decided that it was because *she* believed him a cardsharper and he didn't want her to think anything but good of him.

"Suppose, then, that I don't deny it any more, that I came all the way from Driggs City knowing that your father was a sucker in any kind of card game; that I started out from Kansas with the sole idea of finding Streak and Deuces and Unit and Jernigan and your father, all ready for a game; that I made it up with my two partners to skin your father; that I dealt off the bottom and out of the middle and finally cleaned Snake Fentress. . . . Is that all right, so far? Is that what you believe and want me to admit is true?"

"There's no question about what I want. That certainly is very like the truth! Now. . . ."

"Just a minute! I say, suppose I don't deny that. What have we got, then? I own the Snake, which will be the KKKK as soon as I can change the brand on the books. I have got the Oslins on my south line. They are carrying on the feud with the outfit. It didn't die with your father. They tried to wipe me out today, and lost Pres Spofford, killed very dead by me, in the attempt. Now, the real question is, will they also carry on the feud with you and your little horse-ranch? I understand that you and Tick Oslin had quite a love affair before you fell out . . ."

"That's an outright lie! He tried to make love to me and I quirted him off at the last. There never was any love affair! He simply had ideas that might have been good in some places, but didn't assay at all in my neighborhood."

"Just as you say . . . and I'm glad it's that way. Because. . . ."

He was silent for so long, staring at her, that she leaned a little forward, holding the crayon portrait of an elderly woman across the saddle, and seemed to wait for his words.

"Because I do believe you're going to admit one of these days soon that you've been wrong in your opinions. And when that time comes I'll be glad to hear it. And I couldn't think as much of you as I do think, even now, if you had been the least bit interested in the like of Tick Oslin. Now, go ahead! And if you think of anything else in the house that you want, don't bother at all about coming after it or sending after it."

He whirled Coaly "on a dime" and sent the black cutting horse racing away. He did not look back until he had topped a rise and could have a look without seeming to turn. She was still sitting where he had left her, staring at his back. He went over the rise and down the other side. When he got back to Smoky and Q he was grinning slightly.

"No mail for us?" Q inquired blandly. "We just got to live out on the bald prairee without knowing how things go?"

"You can ride in, first time the work's done, and see if that Valentine widow's willing to take you back," Don promised, grinning. "She was a li'l' bitsy slim woman, Smoky, this valentine of Q's. Bet she didn't heft over three hundred, dressed. They made a *lovely* couple. Hey, you! Don't you quirt Coaly! Le' me tell!"

CHAPTER V

Hoofbeats at Night

The old house was silent and deserted. The three of them made camp in the long, high-ceiled front room and cooked in the kitchen. After supper they sprawled comfortably upon the side gallery and Don charted a plan for them.

"Somewhere in this bunch of papers Snake Fentress gave me, there's a list of boundaries," he told Q and Smoky. "We'll check on marks and the like and have a look at the stock. We'll cut out anything that looks like a blotted brand until I can have a talk with that sheriff in town. He looked to be a reasonable sort of man. I'll tell him what I want to do."

"Con Homer's likely to pass out on you, if you take a tale like that to him," Smoky prophesied. "He's a reasonable man, all right; a straight sheriff, too. But his heart ain't awful strong and the idee of the Snake owner wanting to return rustled stock is just pretty apt to be too much for him."

"But this is the Ks owner," Don reminded him, grinning.

He straightened in the darkness and half-drew his pistol. The others, too, had caught the thud of hoofbeats. They waited tensely. That rider was coming from southeast. . . .

"Could be from Helen's *or* from the Rocking O," thought Don.

It was a Mexican youth and he asked for his *patrona.* She had come to the Snake, he understood. He had a message for her.

"She went back to her own house," Don said in the Spanish that was as natural to him as English. "Is there—trouble?"

"I—I do not know what I should do; what I should say," the young *vaquero* hesitated. "I heard of you winning the Snake from my *patrona's* father; and of his death today. All this I heard before I went to our south line to look for our stallion and his *mañada.* But. . . ."

"If this is trouble that concerns the *señorita,* then it is right that you tell us, tell me," Don assured him. "For my winning the Snake was a matter between her father and me and has nothing to do with friendship. I consider myself her friend, no matter what she may think or say. I will help, if I can."

"Help is needed! Our *mañada* is gone. I know that it went into the Rocking O. And on our little place there is none but me and my cousin, who is not a man like me, but only a boy. If we ride to tell the sheriff, the mares and El Arab the stallion will be gone into the Oslins' hiding places long before we can return. If you will help, *señor*. . . ."

"Take us to where you lost the trail," Don grunted.

They resaddled and rode at the hard trot after him. The moon rose above the Snake Hills and the range was as bright, almost, as in the daylight. It was not far, less than five miles. They gathered beside a little creek and with sight of the hoofmarks Don understood that this youngster had not told the precise truth. He had seen the trail going south into the Oslin range; he had not cared to follow it against Oslin guns.

"It is very fresh," he said. "Perhaps if we ride fast we can come up to our mares, and our thieves. . . ."

The boy knew the range in its every foot. He led the way over rolling range that flanked the higher rises of the hills. Don voiced his thought without turning:

"They must have headed this way after their brush with us; sighted the stallion and just decided on the spur of the moment to hit the Fentress family another lick. They certainly can't be far ahead of us, and not traveling as fast. . . ."

"I think they will head for the end of the hills, yonder," the *vaquero* told him suddenly. "Since they have come this far straight into the south, it is the way to the deeper hills that lie, half in the Rocking O, half in the Snake range. If we cut a line, so, we may even reach the hills ahead of them."

"Why wouldn't they cut across, too?" Q demanded, and repeated the question in Spanish.

"To lose the trail yonder, on hard ground," the *vaquero* explained. "It is the thing *I* would do."

They rode on the long diagonal indicated; rode hell-for-leather without seeing or hearing men or horses. The *vaquero* pulled in at last on the brink of a wide, shallow canyon. He leaned to listen, then swore excitedly, triumphantly.

"I was right! I hear them down the canyon!"

"You were right," Don agreed. "There are twenty horses, if no more, coming toward us. Now!"

He split his party, taking the *vaquero* with him across the canyon and into it. He and the youngster were against the far wall, while Q and Smoky waited on the rim, fifty yards apart. The advantage of surprise would be with the attackers, but that edge would hold only for the moment of the first fire.

"Still," Don considered comfortably, "it may mean another saddle or two emptied, for the Rocking O. . . ."

The clatter of hoofs on rocks became louder. Then a pair of mares, trotting almost neck-and-neck, burst past the two where they sat sheltered by boulders. Others followed. Evidently El Arab was loitering behind, between his harem and the riders.

"Get your Winchester ready," Don told the Mexican.

But a sudden shrill yell from somewhere in the *mañada's* drag, followed by shots, told of something miscarried.

Don spurred out and the mares whirled and ran back in the direction from which they had come. Smoky and Q were firing from the canyon rim, now. Answering fire came from the canyon. But neither Don nor the *vaquero* could fire because of the milling mares and the distance that separated them from the Oslins.

The *mañada's* run became a stampede. The mares which had passed Don and the *vaquero* turned and raced back, passing the

two. Smoky and Q gave up the firing and as he followed as fast as Coaly could safely go over the rocky floor of the canyon, Don heard the thunder of their horses' hoofs behind him.

They came out of the canyon onto a flat. The *mañada* was heading almost due north. Into the west, where the hills offered shelter, three or four riders were quirting furiously away.

Don pulled in, shrugging. When Smoky and Q overtook him, he said calmly:

"Let 'em go, for tonight. Once they get into the hills, it would be their turkey. They'd turn somewhere and shoot the seams out of our clothes. We got the *mañada* back."

"I will follow El Arab and his wives," the *vaquero* said happily. "I will see that they are deep in our range before dawn comes. And *la patrona* will thank you tomorrow."

"I'm sure of that!" grunted Don. "More likely to accuse me of trying to run off her stallion, if I know what to expect."

The three jogged back toward the Snake house and, crossing a small pasture that Smoky knew, found a horse band, evidently old Snake's *remuda*. They drove the horses up to the corral behind the house and barred them in, then slept on the gallery.

They were up at daylight and Don cooked breakfast. He explained to Smoky that it was unusual for an owner to play cook. Q grinned, where he sat at the long kitchen table:

"Not only unusual, but damn' dangerous, when the owner is no better cook than you! Remember that cow-work behind Glass Mountain, when you cooked one day? And how thirty of us volunteered to do the cooking, after that?"

"That was long ago, in the days of my careless youth," Don said gravely. "I've learned five new ways to burn beans, since then. Beau McCutcheon and the Star boys would love me, now. Come and git it! We'll hire us a cook, next time in town. Meanwhile, I want to look over the range."

When they had finished an enormous meal of feathery flapjacks and crisp bacon and warm beans and coffee, Don studied the deed which Snake Fentress had conveyed to him. The others stood at his elbows while he pored over landmarks.

"All right!" he said at the last. "I think we're straight. And we'd better split up for the day, but you *gunies* ride the ridges hawkeyed and, and *anti-Oslin* as well as anti-godlin. Smoky. . . . You said you'd seen some things, while you ridge-hopped. Anything you want to spill to your sainted employer, son?"

"My back don't feel so wide, now I got you two to help cover it," drawled the giant. "My notion is, old Snake held whatever sorefoot stuff he had in what I always called the Sinkhole. It's a roundish hole in the hills with a coupla passages into it not a bit wider than a good-sized saloon door. You could stop up both gates with a Texas rope and some rags and keep in whatever you had in the place. There's water. I never went down into it, account of the wideness of my back. But I could see green strips that nothing but water'd make."

"And where's this place?"

"You ride north ten miles. You'll come to a greeny fiddle of rock. That's the line between the Cross J and the Snake, the Ks. Head west, then, two-three miles and climb clean to the top of a rise that's got three humpback' women on it. Look north."

When the others were riding east and west, Don saddled a good palomina from the bunch in the corral. The palomina was salty, not to say snorty. He was not hard to rope, when an expert flipped up the loop. Nor did he fight at the snubbing post when he was saddled. But once Don was "in his middle" he came

unwound. Horse and rider did not understand each other for five minutes but when the palomina leveled and trotted off sedately, Don grinned and rubbed his sore belly.

"A great country," he said aloud. "I like it a lot. Good horses and . . . Ah, don't be a *tonto,* Don Travis! If you'd offer her the place, now, she wouldn't take it. She'd rather enjoy herself hating you."

He had no trouble following Smoky's directions to the Sinkhole. From the hill of three humpbacked women he looked into the round valley and nodded. For there were cattle there. The entrances were closed by lariats on which tattered rags flapped. He went painfully down and into the place. There was no need of roping any animal. The Rocking O had not been altered on any of the hundred-odd fat steers.

"The old son!" Don muttered, riding back to jerk a lariat free, then whirling the palomina. "He was her father, but you couldn't much blame the Oslins for stitching him crosswise with buttonholes and fancy touches. I would have felt like doing it myself, if he'd been a neighbor of mine. . . ."

He choused the Oslin steers out of the Sinkhole and was trailing them south when Smoky and Q found him. They looked at the Rocking O animals and shrugged.

"If it's not the tit-for-tattest country!" Q said resignedly. "The Oslins have just stripped the range. Smoky never found a dogie, even. Me, I was plumb forced to take my tail up under my arm and high-tail it out of the Red Rock Pasture. I didn't recognize the gent that Winchestered me but I take it he'd be a tolerable Oslin. Anyhow, I rode over and found Smoky, then we fogged it up here."

"Right! Abs'lutely right," Don told him. "Always bring'm *trabajo* to Papa Travis. When big, bad boys chunk my chilluns home, I do something about it. Come along! I had a kind of halfway notion we might talk sense to that bunch of sidewinders, offer to comb the two ranges and abide by the findings.

"But they don't seem to want common sense. And their damn' foolishness is going to get 'em hurt. You see, Smoky, they just saw Q. Maybe they believe it's just a tender young fellow from Uvalde they've got to deal with. Now, they're going to find out different. . . . They. . . ."

The palomina went into the air, stung by the cartridge Q snapped into his flank. Q yelled enthusiastic advice while Don pulled leather to keep from being piled in the rocks.

"Talk to him!" Q counseled. "Tell him you got his ma's consent to take him out. Stay with him, cowboy! Stay a long time!"

Sedately, they rode out of the rougher hills, but made a fast gallop on better ground. With the instinctive sense of direction of the cowboy, Q pushed his big bay toward Red Rock Pasture.

For all the horseplay, Don was serious. He thought of Helen Fentress, left alone to manage a ranch in a country where, evidently, only the strong survived. Yesterday, though it seemed a long time behind him, she had buried her father. There had been some degree of affection between the two—there must have been! And in that one day she had lost him and lost the ranch. He shook his head. There was nothing she would let him do.

CHAPTER VI
"Leadtalk" Answer

It was a pretty pasture, in many respects, that marked by the monument-like pillar of scarlet stone. Even now, in the beginning of winter, Don could see the normal length of grass on the smooth flat. But he noted such things only me-

chanically; the recovery of his stock was just ahead, he hoped. . . .

"I dunno, exactly," Q answered his question. "I could see a few rumps, but about that time this Winchestering hairpin tried to change the shape of my disposition and I kind of lost interest in li'l' things like cow-brutes. They may have run off ten or ten hundred, for all me!"

"Ideas?" Don inquired of Smoky.

The huge man rubbed stubbled chin. He stared with those liquidly bright dark eyes at the rolling land before them, then nodded and blew out inhaled smoke.

"Yeh. . . . Maybe not too good, but still notions of a kind. It's like that Mex' boy said last night: The Oslins would naturally hold in the hills. There's plenty places to hide anything they don't want us to run onto. Take a looky at the land's lay. Yonder's a gash in the high rolls. If you was driving cattle, you'd head for it. Well!"

Don nodded and altered the palomina's course slightly, to make for the knifelike pass. They rode watchfully, after that, but not alertly enough. . . . They got into the hills and could not avoid a certain amount of noise, for the loose stones of the water-course followed slipped under the horses' hoofs.

They were between high walls when a shot came from somewhere above and ahead of them and a slug whined past Don. He turned the palomina instantly and saw that Smoky was down, pinned under a dead horse. From directly above them another shot made crashing sound. It missed, but only by inches. Don watched the splash of the lead on a rock near Q.

"Off that *caballo,* nitwit!" he yelled at Q, flinging himself to the ground and diving for Smoky's dead mount.

He wriggled around the horse while three Winchesters rained lead all around. Smoky's face, he observed, was tense, but interested rather than nervous.

Don studied the pinned leg, then shoved his carbine under the animal between saddle and ground. Smoky nodded approval and, while Don levered he worked his leg cannily. He grunted explosive relief when he drew his foot clear.

"Kind of got us in the famous tight!" he drawled. "Looks to me like that little hollow yonder ought to suit two our size. Even if we collect lead going it won't be a bit worse'n what we'll gather out here. Q's found him a rock. . . ."

From the shelter of a boulder Q was now firing at one of the enemy. It discouraged the Oslins for long enough to let Don and Smoky gain the ledge the giant had seen. They huddled beneath an overhang and studied the battlefield. Don shook his head.

"Not so *caliente!*" he decided. "In fact, *not!* One man can keep us chewing the gravel, here, while the others cross over and make cute little doilies out of us, from over there. We are kind of up Salt Creek with a tissue paper boat and both oars leaking. . . . But . . ."

He shoved out his Winchester and began to fire rapidly. From the canyon rim opposite a man came tumbling, turning over and over in air. Don stared grimly, but an outburst of shooting from Q behind his boulder in midcanyon and from the rim out of their sight, drew his eyes away before the body crashed to the canyon floor. He swore furiously, impotently, when he saw how Q was having to work frantically around the boulder, lashed narrowly by bullets, to escape the fire from overhead.

There came a lull then. Q hugged the far side of his boulder. Don and Smoky watched the opposite wall of the canyon for sight of a man preparing to fire across at them. Time wore on without event, but when Q was emboldened to try movement, a swift burst of shots sent him back.

Noon came and still neither side could find a target. Don tried a cigarette but found himself too thirsty to smoke. His palomina and Q's tall bay had strayed off down the canyon. He looked for them but they had gone around an elbow.

"Hell with this!" he said at last. "Might as well get shot as roost here till doomsday. You kind of keep watch on me, Smoky. Maybe one of the bushwhackers has got across; maybe not. But I am going to try a sneak close to the wall and see what I can see. If I get away, there'll be a good chance of parting their backhair."

Smoky protested angrily but Don grinned and wriggled out from beneath the ledge. He made ten feet, twenty feet, twenty yards; still there was no shot from overhead to tell that his going had been noticed. He was encouraged to try a bold dash across thirty feet of open space that separated him from a boulder out in the canyon. Once behind that, he thought, he could fire upward. He looked behind him and gathered breath, then lifted himself and ran.

A slug hit him between arm and side, burning both. His hat went off and a heel from his boot, which boot he did not know then, for splinters of rock stung his face, blinding him and sending him flat.

While he sprawled there, clinging desperately to his carbine, he heard the metallic ringing of lead on the rocks all about him and fragments of lead or stone stung his whole body. Through tears he saw the boulder that had been his goal. He set his teeth and crawled toward it.

Shooting was all around him, it seemed. He could not tell whether it was from the canyon, from Q's shelter, or from overhead. He made the boulder but the far side of it sloped so that it offered little shelter. He could only sprawl and try to keep below the lead that came in bursts at him.

"Maybe," he thought grimly, "old Ull Unit had the correct notion. If I had sold *him* the IOUs on the Snake, three of us'd been a damn' sight better off, right now. It does begin to look like an Oslin day!"

He had no chance to fire. By turning with much precaution he could see that Q was in the same predicament. Smoky was under the ledge still, safe for the moment, but muzzled because the Oslins were hidden from him. Don gathered himself again. It was his left boot that was heelless. He had no clear idea of the extent of his wounds. But he could move without too much pain and it was a matter of being killed here, as soon as one of the Oslins climbed into the canyon, or making another run for the far wall. He much preferred the run, he told himself.

Evidently, Smoky could see him, though he could not see the big man. For when he began to bunch himself for the dash, Smoky yelled savagely; called him a crazy nitwit; told him to stay behind the boulder. Don ignored him and was ready to dive out when yells and shots came from the canyon rim. There was a fierce and ragged volley, then a voice yelled his name.

He looked out cautiously but it was a full minute before he saw the man above as more than a vague shape. Even then, he did not recognize him.

"Travis! Oh, Travis!" the man called down. "This is the sheriff, Con Homer. It's all right to come out. We got the Oslins all right."

Don stood and shook his head dazedly. He could still hear the ring of the firing, though he knew that it was over. Q got up, too, and Smoky came from under the ledge. They stared stupidly at each other, then turned to look upward. Men were riding down stock trails in the canyon wall. Don recognized the tall, gray sheriff in the lead.

"Looks like we got up just about in time," Sheriff Homer grunted. "Tick and Bob kind of had you bottled up. Or I

would have figured so, if I'd been in your boots."

"You certainly pulled wings off us, all right," Don nodded. "I was about to try a run for the other wall. But I doubt if I would have made it. They have been scorching us since before noon; they could hardly have missed me in the open."

"Yeh, that's what Helen told me," Homer drawled.

"Helen?" Don repeated, frowning. "Now, what are you telling me? That Helen Fentress told you about this fight?"

"I reckon I am. I was riding with my posse across her place when she rode up hellbent and said you three was holed up by the Oslins. So we come fogging it. Tick Oslin wanted to argue the business and my chief deputy shot him. Bob give up."

"Where's—Helen, now?"

"Up on the rim, I reckon. Was when we started down. What was the row about? They jump you or you jump them?"

"Tell him, Q!" Don snapped. "Loan me a horse, somebody!"

He took Homer's rawboned sorrel as the sheriff dismounted. The sorrel surged up the narrow, slanting trail like a goat, passing men who stared curiously or spoke to Don. He pulled in on the rim and looked about. Young Bob Oslin stood beside a mounted man. He regarded Travis sulkily. But of the girl there was no sign.

"Where's she?" Don called to Bob's guard and, with the man's thumb-jerk, he rammed his heels against the sorrel.

The girl was riding at a lope across a wide flat. At the sound of hoofs behind her she turned. For an instant she seemed ready to spur off, then drew rein and faced him.

"I wanted to tell you something," Don said without preface, coming up beside her. "About that poker—and everything."

"I know about it. There—there's nothing to tell. Ull Unit hunted me up last night, just to explain."

She was flushed and he could not catch her eyes.

"You—you mean, then, that you knew it was not our doing, his and mine, that the Snake went up against our money? You mean that you won't hold it against me that I won?"

"Of course not! If my father put up the place in a poker game, a fair game, and lost it, there's not a word to say. I—I just didn't undertsand it; Streak and Deuces are cheap crooks. You were a stranger and. . . . You're welcome to the place. And . . . I'm terribly sorry about your neck, you know, where I hit you . . ."

"It's nothing; nothing at all. Helen, it's a hard thing to say . . . I only saw you yesterday morning for the first time, but . . . do you think there's a chance of taking back the outfit but, well, letting me stick on it? I'm a pretty tolerable cowman; I can do a lot with this range. Young Bob is the only Oslin left and I think I can make him see reason. There wouldn't be any more feud and . . . Do you think you could have it that way?"

She shook her head. Color was deep in smooth neck and face, now. She looked toward the canyon, where riders were gathering.

"Not—not exactly that way, no. But if you'd just let me have half of it, in spite of the fact that *I* saw *you* for the first time just yesterday. . . ."

"The old partnership basis?" he stopped her, very softly. "The old, *old* partnership basis?"

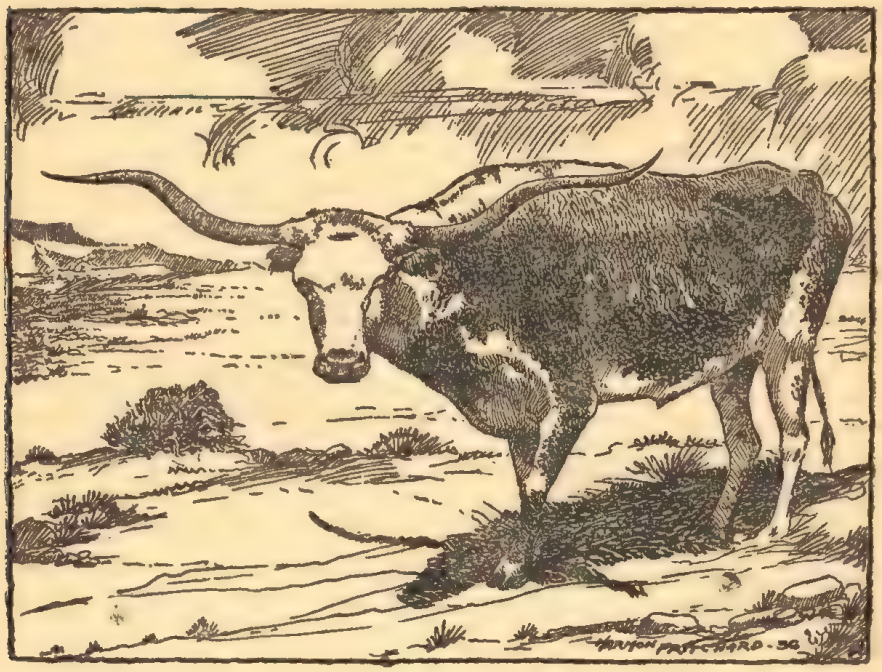
She nodded and continued to meet his eyes. He drew a great, slow breath and put a hand over hers. She twisted her fingers, to hold his, then abruptly jerked free.

"We—we mustn't!" she whispered. "We—we have to talk to Bob and . . . But it's going to be great, Don, these Ks of ours!"

PASSING OF THE LONGHORN

by J. E. GRINSTEAD

Part Of The Old West Died With The Passing Of The Texas Longhorns, But They Remain A Vital Chapter In The Romance Of 'The Old Trail'



The origin of the Texas longhorn is not definitely known. An old trail boss, asked what breed of cattle they were, said in that slow, Texas drawl:

"Well, I don't just exactly know. I rounded 'em up on the prairies, and chunked them out'n the pear thickets, then driv' 'em a thousand miles to market. As well as I can make out, they are half devil and half bobcat. Enough devil to have fire and smoke on their horns when they run, and enough bobcat to fight anything on earth . . . and generally win the fight."

There are many theories about the origin of this strange breed of cattle, and some are about as fantastic as that given by the old trail boss. The most reasonable one is that Texas longhorns were descendants of cattle brought into Mexico by the Spaniards at the time of the conquest, about four hundred years ago. They multiplied on the open ranges, and their new environment and the wild life they led changed them, through the centuries, until there was little resemblance left to the cattle of Spain.

How wild and almost uncontrollable they had become by the time they drifted north to overrun the coastal plain of Texas, has been tersely expressed by an old time cowboy. A party of riders were trying to pen a little band of longhorns, when a rangy old cow broke out of the little herd and stormed away.

"Rope her, Hen, rope her," one of the men yelled. "Now look what you done!

She was worth two dollars, and you let her get clean away. Why didn't you rope her, like I said?"

"Rope hell," replied Hen. "Think a feller can rope a telegram?"

The Texas longhorn was, in all essentials, a wild animal. The picture at the head of this article is that of Old Blue, a typical Texas longhorn, with a horn spread of six feet. Dirty dun color, with sides of pied blue.

Old Blue is one of the few remaining clean-strain longhorns. Twenty-three years old, the property of Louis A. Schreiner, of Kerrville, Texas, he spends his waning years in an immense park, along with buffalo, elk, and other almost extinct wild animals. Blue spent six months at the Century of Progress Exposition, and was probably seen by more people than any longhorn that ever lived. In spite of the old fellow's fame, he must, in the language of the poet:

> Feel like one who treads alone,
> Some banquet hall deserted;
> Whose lights are fled, whose garlands dead,
> And all but he departed.

A few years before the Civil War, wealthy men with foresight bought cheap land in Texas and established ranches, believing that it was a question of but a few years until railroads would be hauling beef out of the state.

With her millions of acres of open range, it was thought that Texas could supply the nation, and even the world, with beef. These cattle kings began breeding thousands of longhorns. Following their lead, poor men secured a section or two of land, built crude ranch cabins, and went into the cow business, with all the world for pasture.

Then came the war between the states. For four years no attention was paid to cattle in Texas. The longhorn needed no attention. He was a wild animal and could take care of himself. So when the war was over, literally millions of longhorns roamed the Texas ranges.

There were no transportation facilities. Thieves didn't bother to steal cattle, for they were worth nothing. Hides were high in the Eastern market because there had been few cattle bred in the North during the war.

So for a few years, men took wagons and went out on cattle hunts. Not to round them up and drive them, but to slaughter them for their hides, just as the buffalo were later slaughtered.

This didn't continue long. Although thousands of the cattle bore no brands, and could be claimed by anyone, an outraged public stopped the slaughter.

Contributing to the passing of the longhorn were the packing houses on the Texas coast. These were located at Indianola, Rockport, Fulton and other places. Only vessels of light draft could get into these primitive ports, and shipping live cattle was not to be thought of. Preserving the meat, in a semi-tropical climate, was likewise impractical.

So the packers bought cattle at from one to three dollars per head and slaughtered them. They saved the tallow, which they rendered in immense boilers, and dried the hides and horns. These were shipped in the shallow-draft coasting vessels to Eastern ports and sold.

What of the meat? A pertinent question in these times of high prices. The beef was hauled out and thrown in great heaps, tons of it, mountains of it, to putrefy and disappear. Long afterward, some of the bones were salvaged.

The packing house era was not a long one, but in that time many thousands of Texas longhorns were slaughtered merely for their hides and tallow. Meantime, intrepid ranchmen were trying to find a way to put their cattle on the northern markets, where there was a crying need for meat—a need for feeders, to fatten on the enormous

crops of grain grown on land which had lain fallow throughout the years of the war.

Some tried to drive small herds to New Orleans, and lost the wild cattle in the swamps. Others tried to drive to Kansas City, which was then a village on the banks of the Big Muddy. They did drive there, with reasonable ease. They drew their money in gold, and started back to Texas, only to be set upon and murdered by desperate bands that infested the southwestern part of Missouri, and the eastern part of what is now Oklahoma.

In the early 70's the Texas packing houses got their death blow. Traces of the old plants still remain for people of the present day to wonder at. Some bold trailer decided to drive a herd due north to Abilene, Kansas, in spite of the waterless plains, made terrible at that time by roving bands of savages. So ended the horrible waste of the Texas packing industry. There was a railroad running east from Abilene, and by the time the wild cattle had been driven a thousand miles, they could be loaded into cars and shipped to the great granary of the middle West to be fattened.

Doubtless there has never been anything in the domestic affairs of humanity so fraught with wild, almost unbelievable romance, as that era of the cattle business in Texas known as the "trail driving days." Not even the wild exploits and the wonderful daring of whaling crews equalled it.

When a man signed on as a trail hand he was simply taking his life in his own hands. He faced multiplied hazards. He rode wild horses, to begin with. He followed a herd of thousands of longhorns, which trailed across the waterless reaches of plain like a great spotted serpent with innumerable spines on its back. He rode herd at night, when at any moment that herd might rise like a flash of light and stampede. Wild at their best, the herd of Texas longhorns in a stampede became an avalanche of uncontrollable terror.

There was an added danger in the men with whom the trail hand worked. As a rule, those who went with those first herds did not value life very highly . . . not even their own lives, or they would not have been there. All were armed, necessarily, because more than half of that thousand miles lay through land where roaming bands of hostile Indians might be encountered, and all of the way lay through country where bands of desperadoes held forth, to plunder whom they might.

Many queer customs prevailed at the beginning of this great overland exodus of cattle from the Texas plains. What with the encroachment of hide hunters, and the packing houses on the coast, cattle began to be valuable. A longhorn steer anywhere from four to ten years old was worth three dollars. So everybody began branding cattle, whether he owned any or not.

The pioneer trail-driver couldn't just go out and round up a herd when he chose. He had to buy them in some fashion. He didn't have more than enough money to grub-stake the venture, perhaps, so the custom arose of simply rounding up a herd, listing the various brands in a tally-book, and driving them to market. When the trail-boss returned from market, a previously agreed price was paid to each owner for as many of his cattle as survived the trip.

There were many things that could happen to cattle in transit in those ancient and perilous days. Whole herds were sometimes killed within a few minutes when they stampeded over a bluff to water, after a long dry drive of days without a drink.

Again, the various Indian tribes through whose reservations the trail lay had to be appeased. Usually it was just a matter of beef, for the buffalo had disappeared from the plains. It was also a matter of giving the Indians as much beef as they requested, for no trail-boss wanted a band

of yelling Indians about his herd of wild cattle.

The usual custom was for a chief and a band of his warriors to approach a herd, and single out the boss. That boss knew what he was up against. He had to do some shrewd trading. He would greet the chief with:

"How, John."

"How," the Indian would grunt. "Wohaw."

"How many?"

The Indian would hold up both hands, twice, indicating twenty head. The boss would hold up one hand, indicating that he would give five head for passing through the reservation. The bartering would go on, until perhaps they split the difference and made it ten. Indians were not thrifty people. They killed the beef and ate it, then went without meat until another herd came along. Many a trail boss has had his herd stampeded, some of his men killed, and perhaps lost his own life, because he did not understand trading with Indians.

It may be pertinent here to explain why the Indian called beef steers "wohaw." Indians had a name for buffalo, but they had never seen any cattle until the long trains of government freight, drawn by oxen, were taken to the frontier forts. There they heard the bull-whackers yell "Whoa! Haw!" and to them any kind of cattle became "wohaw."

Beyond the actual dangers of the trail, which were many and varied, the trail hand had to run a worse gauntlet when the cattle were sold, and he drew his money. For a while, Abilene, Kansas was the only northern market. It was the "end of track" for the railroad, and the camp-followers of that great enterprise were there.

Other human vultures soon learned that there was easy money to be had from the trail hands, who had been on the drive for months and had not had a drink, seen a woman, or heard a fiddle. Soon Abilene was the fastest spot in western America. Every device that human ingenuity could conceive to take money away from the trail hands was in full swing.

Then the railroad was built on to Fort Dodge. Dodge City sprang up to outshine Abilene in gilt and tinsel, and traps for the unwary trail hand, many of whom were killed in dance halls and saloons, or murdered in the dark streets for the money that they were thought to have on them.

The men and their equipment, in those original trail outfits, bore about the same resemblance to a cow outfit of recent years as the little ships of Columbus would have borne to the Normandie.

The men were shaggy, hard-bitten fellows. Their arms were mostly cap-and-ball guns, their draw quick, and their aim unerring, for they were almost as wild as the cattle they drove, and they had no ammunition to waste. Their hats were not neat Stetsons, but broad and battered sombreros, with a thong run in the edge of the brim to keep them from flapping in the wind.

Their chaparejos were more often than not made of yearling hides, tanned with the hair on. Their ropes were of plaited rawhide, or braided hair. Their saddles were mostly the old Texas tree, with broad, flat horn, and immense wooden stirrups, with fenders for the toes.

But the evolution of the trail outfit was swift. Within a few years, trail driving became an immense business. The hands had more modern equipment, and the bosses used more business-like methods.

The price of Texas longhorns soared to ten and twelve dollars delivered to the herd. It took money, and a lot of it for those days, to handle a big trail herd. Ranchmen no longer let trailers drive their cattle, and pay when they came back to Texas . . . if they came back. It was cash on the barrel-head.

So trail driving became big business. Those old trailers, at least many of them, believed that their sons and their grandsons would still be driving cattle to the Kansas shipping points, or driving them on over the fifteen hundred mile trail to Montana. They didn't believe the time could ever come when those wild animals could be rounded up out of the pear thickets, and loaded on trains.

Perhaps they were right. It was never to be known. By the time the railroads had stretched their first tentacles of steel well into the longhorn country, the true Texas longhorn was already on his way out. Trail-driving began to wane in the early 80's for two reasons, at least. One was barbed wire fence. The other was that a new sort of ranchman had taken hold of the cow business in Texas.

The original Texas ranchman believed in the longhorn. To him:

> A cow was a cow, and steer was a steer,
> A bull was a scrub, but he didn't keer!

He refused to believe that any other kind of cattle on earth could survive the ticks, the predatory wild animals, and the long drouths that struck the Texas cow country from time to time.

It took several years until the progressive ranchmen learned that they couldn't blot the longhorn out with a horde of better cattle, but that they could grade their cattle, gradually, into better animals. They did this, though many thousands of dollars were lost before they learned to use vaccine and other cures for saving their imported bulls from tick fever and assorted ills, until they became acclimated.

Then they discovered the Hereford and the bramah, and the end of the longhorn was near. Gradually the improved breeds spread down through the State, until they were grazing in the very pear thickets which had for so long been the home of the Texas longhorn. The gigantic task of eradicating the fever tick from thousands of square miles of range was performed, and tick fever was no longer a menace to better bred animals.

So passed the Texas longhorn as an important factor in feeding a nation of meat-eaters. The romance of the Old Trail will live as long as the nation lives. No man who has not seen a few thousand longhorns in a wild, earth-shaking stampede on a stormy night, with lightning playing on their horns, can understand what it was like.

Even he who has seen that awesome sight, and has seen a little band of men take their lives in their hands while they tried to "mill" the careening avalanche, cannot find words to paint an adequate picture of such a scene.

There is still a West, and will long be. There is still a place where men ride horses, and work cattle. But along with the passing of many other pioneer things, the longhorn and trail driving has passed into the memory of a few old men who now meet and reminisce over "the good old days."

As a wealth of oil from the earth supplanted whaling, so did modern methods of ranching and modern breeding of cattle bring about the passing of the Texas longhorn. He is no more. Forgotten, except when a pair of mounted horns is seen in some rich cowman's home, or when a cowboy finds a warped and twisted pair at a waterhole on the far flung plains, and understands that they probably belonged to some rangy old steer who reached that waterhole after a long, dry drive, and could go no farther.

The Texas longhorn is no more. He served a useful purpose, and helped feed a nation until men learned a better way. Peace to his ashes, and to the fragments of horn and bone that lie in out-of-the-way places, along the Old Chisum trail. Peace, likewise, to the ashes of the men who drove them. They were true pioneers.

The Claws of Chispa Charley

A BOOSTY PECKLEBERRY LAUGH RIOT

By

S. OMAR BARKER

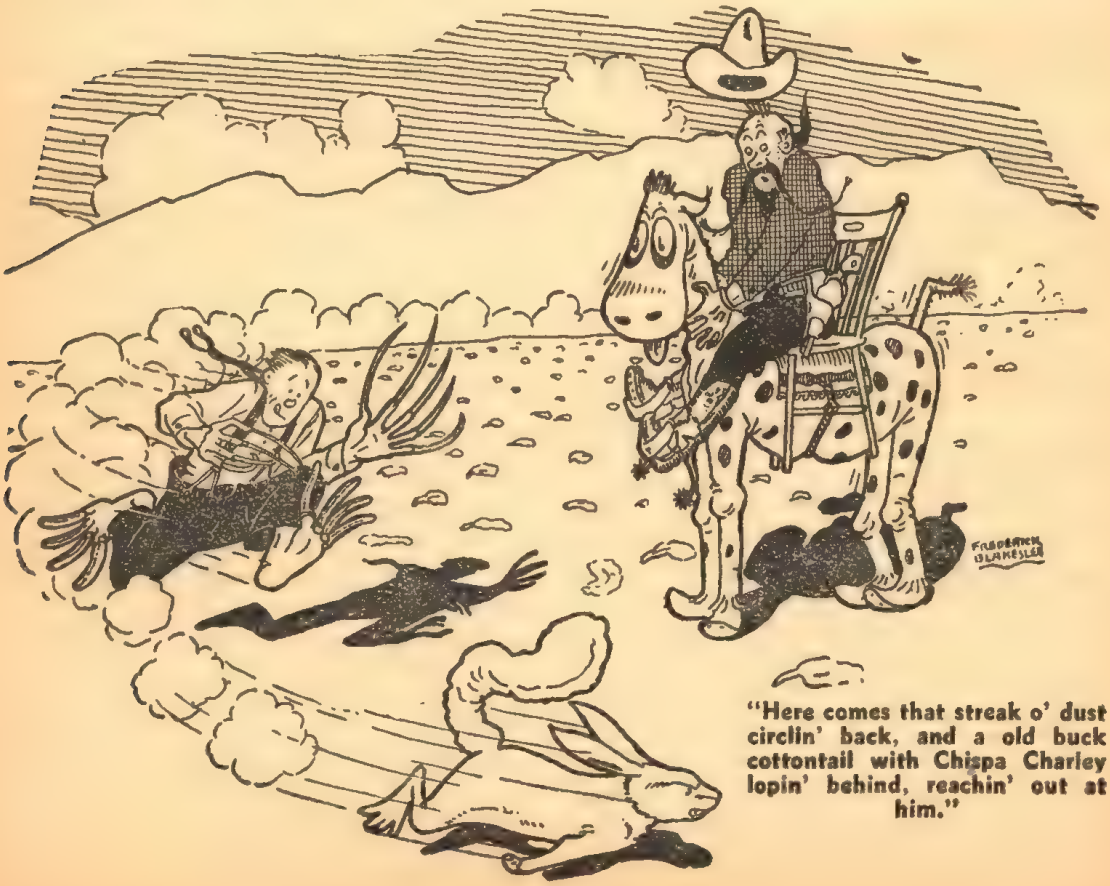
"I see by the papers," said Bran Mash Mullens, snipping off half an inch of toenail with a pair of wire cutters, "they been havin' right smart of snow back east. Stacked up to where ever' telegraph office in Chicago is plumb overrun with snowshoe rabbits."

"Rabbits?" Banty McGinnis left off reaming out an ear with a spur rowel to look up inquiringly. "What the hell you mean, rabbits?"

"Sure," grinned Bran Mash. "Snow's drifted up even with telegraph wires ever'-wheres to where all them Wisconsin snow-shoe rabbits is usin' 'em for toboggin slides, sorter shootin' the chutes, and thousands of 'em git to goin' so fast they slide right on down into Chicago by telegraph!"

"Jest a flurry," grunted old Boosty Peckleberry, looping a neat half-hitch of mustache around a chunk of stove wood and carting the load to the fire. "Jest a little ol' flurry."

"Yeah," offered Biff Wilkins, looking up



"Here comes that streak o' dust circlin' back, and a old buck cottontail with Chispa Charley lopin' behind, reachin' out at him."

from polishing his mouth harp with a sock. "Snowed up on the Picketwire one time to where me an' Bill Rosser, snowshoein' into Trinidad to see a circus, why we couldn't even find the damn town. Monkeyed around there half a day, lookin' for a chimley or somethin' so we could anyways dig for a saloon, but no luck.

"Finally Bill spied a coupla little ol' roundish knobs, like horns, stickin' up a few inches outa that vast blanket of white. Well, sir, we taken holt of them nobs an' pulled, an' damn if we didn't drag us out a gee-rafe."

The new hand named Lufe frowned thoughtfully.

"Ever tell you 'bout the time my uncle made camp on a snowdrift up on Montana, an' one of those warm Chinooks blowed up in the night, melted out the snow, so that when he woke up in the morning his bed was floatin' around on a lake, an' . . ."

"Yeah," broke in Banty McGinnis, "I've had it happen to me jest like that. Chinook blowed so warm one time that I woke up to find a big catfish crawlin' into bed with me to git outa the hot water. But for a real shore 'nough snow . . ."

"Seem like we don't git no snow hardly the past twenty-five, thirty winters, like we used to," broke in Mr. Boosty Peckleberry. He wadded the ends of his hosstail mustaches into two neat balls, shoved them into his hip pockets, and spat reminiscently, and accurately, at a spider dangling from a bunkhouse rafter. The spider dropped neatly into the woodbox. "Don't rarely git over twenty, thirty feet deep any more, an' then melts right off, come summer."

You take a genuwine snowstorm (he continued), like that one down in New Mexico the time me an' Chispa Charley was building them San Andres Mountins for the guvmint to keep them Rio Grande muskeeters frum flyin' over to Mescalero an' carryin' off the Injuns, why that was right smart of a snow.

It'd of took more'n any little ol' overnight Chinook to melt it down to where you could pull a gee-rafe out of it. Fact, seems like a lot of it was natcherly unmeltable, anyways. Even when you burnt it, the ashes stayed as white as the caboose flag on a cottontail.

Speakin' o' cottontails, I don't reckon any you tendergutted young sprouts recollect back to when rabbits' tails was six, eight inches long an' curled over like a poodle pup's, do you? That was before Chispa Charley got holt of 'em. 'Course you've heard tell of Chispa Charley? He was the lad that usta go 'round barefoot, kickin' the teeth outa the rattlesnakes so ol' Pecos Bill, which was an awful sissy some ways, could use 'em for quirts when he usta ride around showin' off on them ol' mountin lions. That was after Chispa Charley had saddle-broke 'em for him, o' course.

But I was tellin' you 'bout this ol' snowstorm. It come slantin' outa the east where I was bossin' them forty grizzly bears I had hired to stomp around an' kinder tamp down the dirt an' rock that Charley was scratchin' up outa the valley to build them mountins with.

I kinder noticed it was snowin' a mite, jest little flakes four, five inches in diameter at first; but I didn't think nothin' of it till a five foot flake came on at a might' 'nigh horimazontal slant by the wind. The edge of it hit one of my grizzlies, a two-ton tamper name o' Tootin' Tom, an' sliced him right in two, frum tail to tucker.

Then I realized we was in for a storm. Any time you git a snowflake that'll slash like a razor an' not even crack, why, boys, that's a might' fair sign it's aimin to storm.

Gents an' jaw-wagglers, there set that doggone buck Injun, slicin' off bear steaks with his tommyhawk an' gobblin' 'em down to where . . . What say?

Why, he was one of them Mescalero Patchies, o' course. They never would stay on their own resermavations. This buck was the first 'un I noticed, but as more an' more of them big snowflakes come driftin' over I persoove they was Injuns squattin' all over 'em. Why, the dang stinkers, as them snowflakes came driftin' low past White Mountin Peak, they was jest jumpin' onto 'em for the ride.

You know them Patchie Injuns was all originally located up there around Mescalero. It was ridin' them snowflakes that scattered 'em way out in Arimazona an' that country. Why, they's even a town named Snowflake out there, ain't they?

Now this Chispa Charley, he was right smart of a boy. How come me to meet up with him? It was way back in the year them grass fires began bustin' out all over the country, an' Andy Jackson, being president at the time, he sent word out by ol' Kit Carson that the smoke of them grass fires was driftin' into Washin'-ton so thick you couldn't tell a Demmycrat from a Republican at ten paces, unless it would be by the smell.

An' he was gittin' might' tired of it, to where if us cowboy fellers didn't do somethin', he was goin' to turn his ol' Missikasoopy River loose on us an' drown out the whole damn West. So me an' ol' Kit an' Sam Houston an' Wild Bill Hipcock an' Sheriff Pat Garrett an' Pecos Bill an' a few other leadin' perfessors of the West, we helt us a conference, which app'inted me to circumalligate 'round and find out what was causin' all them grass fires.

Well, I found out. It was Chispa Charley. First time I jumped that young 'un outa the caprock I figgered I'd spooked the devil outa hell. Because yonder he went, naked as a roasted rooster, runnin' to beat all hell, an' ever' time he'd hit a rocky place the sparks would shore fly, to where if he was anywheres near dry grass, it'd start the smoke a-rollin'.

I expect I wouldn't never have ketched him, but about the fourth day, he run into them Carlsbad Caves. It was dark in there to where he couldn't see me, but I could foller him by the sparks a-flyin' from his hoofs, an' with that advantidge, I got him.

I drug him, squawlin' an' buckin', back out into the daylight to examine what manner of critter he was, an' gents, I was shore surprised. For what I'd ketched, it was jest a little ol' scrawny boy 'bout ten years, three months, eighteen days an' seven hours of age, an' as wild as a wolf.

I kinder looked him over, but there wasn't nothing remarkable about him except his nails, both hand and toe. But them toenails on that boy was as long as Biff Wilkins' nose, jest about the same shape, an' as hard as flint. It was them strikin' fire off'n the rocks that had been causin' all them grass fires ever'wheres this wild boy run.

Well, he was a-squawlin' an' fightin' his head 'round, to where I figgered I'd have to spit in his eyes an' hawg him down to handle him; but he wasn't by no means dumb, an' he shore was proud of them nails, for when he seen I was admirin' 'em, he fettered down some, kinder grinned an' says:

"Some claws, ain't they, Granpaw?"

"Yes," I says, "I don't know as I ever see anything like 'em, even at the nail-whittlin' hour in a cowboy bunkhouse. How the hell you ever grow nails like them, son?"

So he says it's on account of ever since he went wild he's been on a diet of baked horny toad with cactus dressin', with catclaw an' mesquite thorns fer dessert, an' would I enjoy him to show me how he could scratch?

"No, son," I tells him. "You got to quit this hell-firin' around. I'm goin' to take you back to your maw."

To which he says no, that he ain't got no maw nor paw.

"Them Rio Grande muskeeters," he says, "they et my paw an' maw both up long ago."

Which it seems that's how come him to be runnin' wild. All he ever seen of his parents after them muskeeters got 'em was endurin' a cold spell when the Rio friz over quite a stretch an' he peeked over a hill an' spied them muskeeters out on that ice playin' a game of hockey.

Said his pappy had always been a drinkin' man, right outa the keg, an' to keep him from drinkin' too much at ary one time, his maw had always made his pappy straddle the keg an' stretch his neck for the spigot, to where it give a peculiar bend to his legs, an' damn if them muskeeters wasn't usin' his pappy's leg bones fer hockey sticks.

Said it didn't hardly seem right decent, so he run out there on the ice to rescue them remnants of his pappy's carkiss, an' one of them muskeeters—the big ol' cigar bellied feller that was refereein' the hockey game—jest grabbed him an' flew off with him, headin' east. Prob'ly aimin' to throw him into the Atmalantic Ocean; but they run into one of them high plains whirlwinds, an' that ol' muskeeter had to drop him.

'Course the whirlwind had skun all the clothes off'n him, to where he landed naked; an' bein' kinder of a bashtful nature, he hated to hunt up anybody to ask 'em fer clothes, so he jest decided to go wild.

Tears as big as Texas ticks rolled out of his eyes as he told me this tragic hist'ry, an' boys, them tears was as hard an' round as cannon-balls. That's how tough he was.

But boys, I kinder taken a likin' to that little ol' claw-toed kid an' aimed to adapt him.

"Son," I says, "what's your name?"

But he said the whirlwind had unskun him from his name, too.

So I jest named him Chispa Charley, "chispa" bein' the Spanish for a spark of fire like he'd been strikin' with them flinty toenails of his, the Charley bein' after my ol' chewin' uncle that—*ssffutt*—splashed most o' the yaller onto them cliffs up on the Yallerstone.

What say? Well, I'm comin' to that snowstorm in due time, Bran Mash, an' if you don't enjoy to hear what ol' Chispa Charley had to do with it, you can jest go learn your granmaw to milk ducks.

So I told Chispa Charley I aimed to adapt him, an' he says it'll suit him okay, so long as there ain't no muskeeters where I live. So I told him that where I lived was mostly wherever I happened to be at the time, but I never bent my trail none to go around a damn muskeeter, an' if he'd jest learn to chaw like me an' swaller ever' fourth cheekful of the squeezins, why the muskeeters wouldn't pester him none, account of them perferrin' vanilla. An' he says okay, an' would I object to him callin' me granpaw?

So I told him no, but did I look like his own granpaw or what? An' he says no, but that his pappy used to have an ol' burro they called Granpaw, only he had a tail till he twisted it off one day fightin' the muskeeters, an' . . .

"Well," I told him, "I got mine cut off ridin' razorback hawgs when I was a young 'un back in Arkinsaw, so you call me granpaw if you like. Only let's git goin'."

For I'd been out quite a spell an' wanted to git back an' see if my cotton was ready to pick.

But dawg me fer a wolf, boys, if I didn't have a time with that young 'un. He couldn't ride 'cause he didn't have no hoss, an' when he walked he run, an' when he run he kep' the sparks flyin'. So finally I hazed him down to the Pecos, set him on the bank with them longhorned feet of his danglin' into the water, an' told him to set there an' soak 'em while I loped up

to Seven Rivers fer an axe to hew 'em off with.

Y'know, when I got back with the axe a coupla hours later, danged if Chispa Charley didn't have forty-four catfish layin' out there on the bank that he'd speared with them toenails. Now a feller jest cain't delibertly chop off a set of implements that can furnish you with fish like that, so what I done, I skun out them catfish an' laced their hides onto his toes fer scabbards to keep him from sparkin' the rocks, an' we traveled purty good after that. Only trouble was I had to gig my hoss continual to keep up with him, for that Charley boy could shore step out.

How fast could he run? Well, I'll tell you, boys. That was the year I was raisin' me a crop of cotton. I'd laid out the rows with an ol' bullsnake an' hoed the crop with a corkscrew so the cotton would grow with kinks in it. That was to make it springier, to where it wouldn't flatten down too quick in them elephant mattrisses.

That's what I said. Jest exackly. Elephant mattrisses. Seem like His Royal Highniss, the Bulge-Eyed Buck of Blookistan, being one of them Orimental Potentates, had been sparkin' the hi-toned daughter of one of the neighborin' ranchmen over there, the Gitmuch of Takitall, to where she'd finally agreed to the hitch pervided this ol' Bulge-Eyed Buck could furnish proper beddin' for her herd of private elephants, which was such dainty critters that nothin' would do 'em but mattrisses thirty-eight feet thick, and stuffed with this special kinky cotton.

The Buck of Blookistan had told her he'd gladly shave the heads of a few million of his niggers an' make the mattrisses out of their wool, but she had throwed her nose-ring in the air an' allowed it was a case of cotton or no cutie. So he'd sent ten ships over to Pres'dent Andy Jackson after kinky cotton, an' ol' Andy sent word it was up to us Western boys to raise it for him, as there was already too many crooked things in the East, an' we let in to do so.

Well, I knowed my kinky cotton crop must be about ripe. an' I was might' anxious to git it gathered; so seen' that little Chispa Charley kep' leadin' me such a stretch, I finally sent him on ahead to pick cotton, an' I'd be along accordin' to how my hoss helt out.

Well, sir, I camped that evenin', an' I hadn't hardly got the cuckleburrs combed outa my whiskers when here comes Chispa Charley. An' dang if he didn't look kinder discouraged.

I ask him if he'd picked any cotton that day, an' he said yes, he'd gathered right smart of a pile, but seem like it was mighty tight on the stalks, an' if he had a pair of scissors to twick it off with, he'd jest do a heap better the next time.

Well, natcherly I didn't have no scissors, but I had a hoss-shoein' rasp I allus carried along to keep my warts wore down with, so Charley asked for that. I let him have it, an' I'll be dawged fer a wolf if he didn't take an' file an edge onto a pair of them long fingernails on each of his hands, to where by scissorin' his fingers he had two pair of as snappish ol' snips as a snake ever sneezed at.

Next mornin', he taken out agin to pick cotton an' late that night he come moseyin' back into camp, an' he shore was tired, but might' happy, for them snips had worked perfect, he said, to where he had cotton piled up all over the country.

"But granpaw," he says, "what I need, I need a bigger sack, on account of it takes so much time runnin' back to the pile ever' time with the cotton after I've ketched one."

"Ketched one?" I says. "Don't tell me my cotton patch has gone wild on me an' has to be run down!"

"Well," he says, "some of 'em ain't so wild, but some of the ol' bucks, it takes me eight, ten miles to run 'em down.

'Course I don't mind the work, but these here toe scabbards is wearin' thin to where I'm afeerd I'll be settin' grass fires again, first thing you know."

Well, y' know, that kinder puzzled me, till I concluded he was jest joshin' me with a windy. But gents, he wasn't. For jest as I hove over the hill at the head of the Conejos Valley the next day, here come a streak of dust, hellbent for nowheres, right apast me, an' Chispa Charley bellerin' after it like an ol' hound dawg on a coon trail, wavin' them fingernail scissors over his head.

Off acrosst the valley, far as I could see, was great big ol' white piles of cotton, which puzzled me, for I knowed my kinky cotton patch was still a good fifty miles further on.

Well, sir, here come that streak of dust circlin' back, an' I see it was an ol' buck cottontail rabbit, runnin' like the heel flies had him, and' jest as he come abreast, Chispa Charley loped up behind him, reached out at him, an' snip! Off dropped that rabbit's tail.

Chispa Charley picked it up an' brung it over to show me.

"How's this for a kinky 'un, granpaw?" he says.

Like I said, I don't reckon none of you young goose-gizzerds recollect back to when rabbits' tails was kinky-curled like a poodle pup's an' from six inches to two foot long all over this country? I'll be dawged fer a wolf if ol' Chispa Charley had even located my planted cotton patch!

Never having seen none of that variety, when I'd told him to go pick cotton natcherly he took me to mean cottontails. 'Course he had some trouble twistin' their tails off the first day, but with them fingernail snips he was shore pilin' up the kinky cotton for me.

A mighty good thing he was, too, for endurin' my absence, that dratted Pecos Bill had pastured a herd of his snakes in my cotton patch, to where there wasn't enough cotton left in the boll to stuff a holler tooth. Yeah, you've heard of them cotton mouth snakes, ain't you?

But we sent the Buck of Blookistan his kinky cotton for them elephant mattrisses jest the same. Ten ship loads of the finest rabbit-tail cotton you ever laid eyes on; an' springy enough, with them kinky stems left right in to bounce a bull elephant to where you could throw a mule under him.

Natcherly, however, there wasn't none of them long ol' rabbit-tails left anywheres by the time we got through, an' rabbits has been short-tailed critters ever since. Jest never growed out good again.

Well, I hope them elephants that the Gitmuch of Takitall give to his daughter fer her dowry enjoyed them cottontail mattrisses. For running' them rabbits might' nigh to wore me out, what with patchin' Chispa Charley's toe scabbards.

Time I adapted that boy he was jest a little ol' runty kid, but after he'd tail-clipped all them rabbits, an' we got the cotton shipped, he was a growed man, an' gittin' a mite tired along towards the last.

Now Chispa Charley was right smart of a runner, but what he loved to do better'n anything else, he loved to scratch. Not hisself, y'understan'. I mean that boy, he loved to dig in the ground with them toenails of his.

He'd step up to a little ol' gravelly hill an' make a valley of it in no time. 'Course his toenails was always strikin' sparks on the rocks, to where I'd have to hop around an' keep the fires sluiced out with chaw-squeezin's. Why, many a day when Charley had one of his diggin' fits on I wouldn't git to swaller no juice from daylight till dark. Jest required all I could mannyfacture to extinguish them sparks.

At first I tried to talk him into huntin' up a sawmill an' gittin' them toenails reamed off, but ever' time I mentioned it he'd begin to squall. Them nails, he said,

was his only pride an' joy, an' he had jest as soon die as give 'em up.

I even went so far as to build a fire under 'em one night when Charley was asleep, but they was so hard they wouldn't even scorch. Jest got red hot an' helt the heat like they was iron. Which give me an idee how to make use of 'em, an' for two, three years me an' Charley hired out at good wages brandin' wild cattle. We'd heat up Charley's nails in the mornin', brand all day with 'em an' they'd still be hot enough to sizzle spit at sundown.

But that work never satisfied Charley. He jest had two aims in life: one was to scratch an' dig, an' the other was to take vengeance on them Rio Grande muskeeters for playin' shinny with his pappy's leg bones. But he wouldn't swaller the juice like I advised him to, an' I was mightily afeered he'd tackle them muskeeters sometime, an' they'd git him jest like they had his paw an' maw.

So I tried to keep his mind off'n revenge by lettin' him dig. We taken a job enlargin' them Carlsbad caves. We hired out to ol' man Livingston to dig out some canyons in them Guadalupe Mountins, which was all as smooth as a turnip them days. Seem like Mr. Livingston was expectin' to have him a son named Carl, an' he wanted them Guadalupes scratched up rough to where Carl would have somewheres to explore that nobody else had ever circumalligated.

I reckon you know there ain't no man alive today that's done the explorin' ol' Carl has in them Guadalupes. 'Course his pappy never told him it was me an' Chispa Charley that roughed the country up for him in the first place, an' I don't want none of you high-bouncers lettin' the secrit out, neither.

It was Chispa Charley that dug them Bottomless Lakes at Roswell, an' them halfway-to-hell dry holes around Santa Rosa. It was whilst diggin' them dry holes that I come might' nigh losin' him.

Y'see, this ol' Pecos Bill that usta go pirootin' around on an ol' he panther, with a rattlesnake fer a quirt an' vine-garroons fer spurs, tryin' to make folks think he was tough, well he jumped Chispa Charley one time 'bout snippin' off all them cottontails. Pecos Bill claimed he was the feller that put the kink in them rabbit-tails to begin with an' he allowed he wouldn't stand for no squint-eyed young squirt a-ruinin' 'em.

So Pecos Bill was grazin' his remuda of mountin lions down a canyon one day when he run onto Chispa Charley innercently raspin' his claws with the back of a petrified horny toad, an' ol' Pecos jest natcherly sic'ed his two hundred head of panthers on him without so much as hollerin' boo. Well sir, Charley shore made a mess of them lions.

It was kinder a narrow canyon, so they could only charge him ten abreast, an' that give Charley his chance. He set down on a ledge with his toenails stretched across the canyon, an' as them lions come snarlin' an' spittin' over 'em, Charley jest flicked his toes to where each one of them nails would hit a lion's tail right close to the roots, an' the heat made them panthers' tails curl right around 'em.

So then Charley would give a kick, toss them lions up in the air, one at a time, an' snip off their tails with them scissor fingernails of his as they come down. Well, it didn't kill the lions, o' course, but it shore made might' skeered bobcats out of 'em, an' you'll see their bobtailed oftspring in the mountains plumb till yit.

The spots? Why, seem like Chispa Charley never could learn to spit without right smart of a splatter. Them spots is what splattered onto them flyin' panthers ever' time Charley spit to cool his scissors.

Charley told me 'bout the fight that evenin'.

"Y'know, granpaw," he says, "them

was the longest tailed damn furbearin' muskeeters I ever run into."

After that, natcherly Pecos Bill wanted to git even, so when he heard Charley was diggin' way down in one of them bottomless holes he rounded up ten thousand tarantchulers an' stampeded 'em right in onto him.

Pizen him? Hell, no! Chispa Charley's hide was too tough for any ol' tarantchuler to bite through. But the tarantchuler wool like to smothered him. Taken me forty days an' nights to comb that tarantchuler wool outa Charley's claws to where he could dig again. 'Course it wasn't all a dead loss, as there's always a good markit fer tarantchuler wool, mostly in Mexico where they make nightshirts out of it fer them Mexkin hairless dawgs so their fleas won't freeze to death.

But the biggest job we ever undertaken, it was pilin' up the San Andres Mountins in the way of them Rio Grande muskeeters to pervent 'em from carryin' off them Mescalero Patchie Injuns.

Maybe you've noticed them San Andres ain't really finished off like mountins ort to be. Well, it was on account of that big snowstorm I'm tellin' you 'bout that we never got 'em completed. For them flakes, which had started out no bigger'n a fryin' pan, not countin' the handle, they kep' gittin' whoppin'er an' whoppin'er, pilin' up the snow so fast it was all my thirty-nine grizzlies could do to keep it tromped down to where it wouldn't smother 'em, what with them also bein' busy tampin' down the mountin makin' material that Chispa Charley was scratchin' up to us three and one half tons to the minute.

But for three days an' nights we helt our own somehow, an' then, I dread to think of it plumb till yit, them thirty-nine ol' grizzlies went on strike an' quit us. Climbed up on one of them floatin' snowflakes, the whole bunch of 'em, an' sailed off westward, thumbin' their noses at me as they went.

Now the snow wasn't over forty feet deep up to then, an' we still might of helt on an' finished the job, but damn if Chispa Charley didn't quit me, too. He come clankin' his claws up outa the big deep hole he'd dug, an' he had a might' mean gleam in his eye.

"Granpaw," he says, "the time has come."

"Which time," I says, "fer what?"

"Fer vengeance!" he whinnies. "If it's snowin' over on the Rio Grande like it is here, all them man-eatin' muskeeters will be bogged down in the drifts up to their ornery necks, or anyways to where they cain't fight to do no good. I'm a-goin' over there an' massacree the whole damn works!"

"Charley," I says, "we hired out to the guvmint to build these here mountins, an' it's our solimn duty to stay here an' finish the job."

"Phooey!" snorts Charley. "Time I git through with them snowbound muskeeters the guvmint won't need no San Andres Mountins! Take keer yerself, granpaw. I'm a-goin'!"

Sayin' which, he lep' onto a big ol' snowflake an' went sailin' off towards the Rio Grande.

Well, I stuck to my post, but it was kinder hopeless. Inside of twenty-four hours and fifty-one minutes I was buried so deep under the snow it would of required a dozen of the longest flagpoles ol' Pecos Bill ever poked at a wolf to even tickle my ears.

Worst of it, I was afeered all that new work we'd jest throwed up would sideslip an' avalanche me into the big ol' hole Charley had been scratchin' out in the valley, which was around twenty miles long, eight miles wide an' as deep as the pits of sin.

What say? You don't recollect seein' no such canyon east of the San Andres?

'Course you don't, you young squirt! Ain't I a-tellin' you how it got filled up?

Well sir, Chispa Charley did come back, 'bout five days, three and one half hours an' twenty minutes later, an' let in to dig me out. Trouble was, by that time I'd tunnelled my way some miles off to the northeast to git outa danger of avalanchin' into Charley's gravel pit, an' Charley couldn't find me.

Lucky I had plenty of chawin' or I reckon I'd of starved to death, for it was a week before ol' Chispa Charley finally dug down to where he hit my tunnel an' seen my tracks leadin' off northeast. Well, I could hear the holler he let out, but ever'-when I tried to answer him I jest coughed up snowballs, instid of a beller.

Well, it was about the third day later, that I heard them ol' claws of his scratchin' might' close, an' the next thing I knowed I smelt smoke.

For what had happened, pore ol' Charley had dug down to where his claws hit one of them outcroppins of flint, struck fire, an' the pitch in all that pitchblende rock begun to burn, an' the next thing I knowed the snow had ketched fire.

Now boys, if you ever git into such a fix, you recollect what I tell you. You chomp your chaw an' keep spittin', for that's what I done, an' my cud-juice kept the snow right 'round me too wet to burn, to where it melted instid, an' as quick as it was slushy enough to swim in, I grabbed my nose an' swum out.

But pore ol' Charley—I'd never been able to learn him the fine art of perducin' juice when chawin', an' the results was I never seen hide nor hair of him ag'in. Nossir, not findin' me, he just kep' on diggin' to where he bogged down in that burnin' pitchblende an' burnt to death.

I reckon you've all noticed the ashes of that there conflamagration. It's that cindery malpais country west of Carrizozo, which if you permilligate around in it, you'll see streaks of a kinder hard flinty substance hith an' yonder. That's the fragments of Chispa Charley's toe an' fingernails that was too tough to burn.

Iggerunt folks calls it the White Sands, but it ain't, as I'm tellin' you! Believe it or go milk a snake, it's a twenty mile bed of roasted snow, fillin' Chispa Charley's gravel pit to the brim, results of the burnin' of that pitchblende peak. *Ssffutt* . . .

"Yeah," offered Bill Wilkins, "my uncle an' Pecos Bill was bustin' hassayampas to the saddle out in Arizona at the time, an' they claimed they smelt snow a-scorchin' some place. It's a right peculiar smell."

"What I want to know," broke in Banty McGinnis, "how did Chispa Charley come out massacreein' them damn muskeeters?"

Old Boosty Peckleberry shook his head sadly.

"Not very good," he said. "Pore Chispa Charley. Instid of bogged down in snowdrifts, he found them muskeeters hidin' out snug in their tents to where he couldn't git at 'em. He challinged 'em to come out an' fight him, an' a couple of ol' callusbellies done so. But Charley couldn't do nothin' with 'em. Seem like they'd rubbed theirselves with bear grease, the dang slickers, to where even ol' Charley's claws, sharp as they was, jest slipped right off, though finally he run 'em back into their tents.

"Why, sure they had tents! Seem like the snowflake them thirty-nine grizzly bears was ridin' on happened to land right in that muskeeter settlement, an' when Charley got there, them dang swampbuzzers had done skun out them grizzlies an' built theirselves them tents outa the hides.

"Well, boys, I'm hittin' the hay. You notice the snow ketchin' fire endurin' the night, you jest open the winder, call me, an' stand clear! *Ssffutt!*"

ROMANCE OF THE LARIAT

By MARTIN FISKE

The History Of One Of The Most Important Parts Of A Cowboy's Gear

One of the most marked contrasts in the cowboy's equipment, from the old time to the modern, is in his ropes. It is an unsolved mystery among present day stockhands and contest ropers how the old-timers managed to catch anything with the flabby, lifeless lariats they used.

Not until the beginning of the twentieth century was there available to the American cowboy a truly efficient type of cordage, combining strength, liveliness, smoothness, durability and reasonable uniformity under varying weather conditions. This was the hard twist, pure manila fiber, so-called "yacht line," still the standard, with certain refinements, on the ranches of the West and in the contest arena for calf and steer roping.

Possibly the first complete and comprehensive display of lariats, old and new, of every country and region, and of all adapted materials, will be shown at the Texas Centennial Exposition opening in June in Dallas. Here, where Texas' one hundredth birthday celebration will be centered, will be featured a great exhibit of all the picturesque and interesting equipment of the cowboys and Rangers who have played so vital a rôle in the winning and development of the Lone Star State.

This exhibit will be housed, appropriately, in the Texas Ranger Ranch House, a building of true pioneer Western design, which will commemorate with its numerous historical exhibits the lives and deeds of the Lone Star frontiersmen.

The practice of catching livestock with the lariat was derived directly from the Spaniards, although the herdsmen of other lands had employed this art still farther back. True skill with the lazo, or reata, first blossomed in Mexico, where until this day the most difficult feats of roping are unequalled.

In fact, roping is practiced and patronized by the prominent and well-to-do

Mexicans in much the same way Americans and Englishmen go in for golf, polo and trapshooting. The famous Charro Club, with its most picturesque costume and trappings, numbers among its members and professionals perhaps the finest all-around ropers, on spinning and straight catches, afoot and horseback, the world has ever known. The late Will Rogers was of this opinion, as are Bob Calen and Tom Kirnan, who with Chester Byers, are the most noted rodeo trick ropers in the game.

Incidentally, all three of these famous ropers have made their homes in Texas for many years, and are scheduled to play prominent parts in the celebration of the State's Centennial Anniversary during 1936.

The original lariats (from the Mexican-Spanish *la reata*—the rope) of ancient times, at least as far back as Cæsar's day, were mere thongs of leather. It is probable the Spaniards learned the art of braiding leather or rawhide into a better implement by the time they conquered Mexico. The oldest Mexican lariats obtained for the Texas Centennial Exposition collection are of this type, which was likewise employed by the first Texas cowboys a hundred years ago.

Braided rawhide ropes were practically the sole dependence of cowboys in Mexican lands for many years. Even now they are occasionally encountered in Southern California and Arizona, less frequently in the northern states of Mexico. Texans, for the most part, abandoned the rawhide reata in favor of fiber cordage about the time the cattle industry in their state reached its heyday in the years following the Civil War.

Rawhide ropes were efficient only when made from carefully selected hides by master craftsmen. They were susceptible to extreme changes from temperature and moisture, and the only practicable method of their use was by "dallying" and thus applying the tug of a captured animal more or less gradually to the rope.

As mentioned already, Texas cowboys long ago quit the rawhide for the twisted hemp, flabby and rough though it must have been by modern standards. The area in which the Texas cattle industry originated was an extremely brushy region. Ropers worked at short range, and they wanted to keep what they caught in the thickets, so they required a lariat that would stand the abrupt strain incident to its being knotted "hard and fast" to the saddle horn.

Their hemp "whale line" (not the "yacht line" of today) met their purposes better than anything else obtainable at the time, and they continued its use in the same manner, though at longer range, as the center of the cow country shifted to the plains.

The rawhide was largely superseded in Mexico as long as thirty years ago by the cable twisted maguey rope, derived from the fibers of the variously useful agave, or century plant. Fabricated by hand, in separate lengths, good maguey lariats are the acme of smoothness and liveliness, but are too hard for efficiency in cold weather, and too springy and kinky for use by a roper unaccustomed to them.

The fiber, though strong, has little elasticity, and consequently the "dally" is used with these ropes exclusively in serious roping of strong stock. The well-known range term "dally," by the way, is an American corruption and contraction of the Mexican expression *"dar la vuelta,"* meaning "to take the turn," and dallying is simply that—the taking of a round turn of the rope on the saddle horn, so it may be snubbed fractionally as the strain comes upon it.

Because of their life, smoothness and fast action, magueys are used almost exclusively by both Mexican and American fancy ropers for making catches. The Mexicans also use the same ropes for

spinning tricks, but their American colleagues prefer the specialized "spot cord," a hard braided cotton rope, for juggling feats that do not involve catches.

Horsehair lariats, both braided and twisted, have never been used in catching stock, or for anything else, when any other kind of rope was available. Even their legendary function of forming a barrier against snakes has been exploded by actual demonstration of its fallacy. Aside from its ornamental possibilities, horsehair is perhaps the poorest of rope materials.

Although flax has been used in making cordage since time immemorial, and linen lariats were on the market at least thirty years ago, it is only within the last five or six years that ropes of this fiber have achieved any considerable popularity among cowboys.

The early linen ropes were braided and saturated with linseed oil, which made them very handy in wet weather but correspondingly gummy and dirty under hot, dry conditions. Furthermore, working cowboys always have had some sort of prejudice against ropes of braided fiber. The linen ropes of other days were discontinued through lack of demand.

In its revived form, the flax fiber lariat is much changed. Hard twisted, three strands heavily coated with a tallow-wax compound that does not become sticky, it makes a rope of extreme strength and durability, very smooth and wet-resisting. For bog hole rescues and muddy corrals, rough and stormy work of all kinds, the modern linen lariat is unexcelled. But still it lacks the indescribable feel of supple life that is inherent in good manila fiber "yacht line," and it is more susceptible to summer sun.

So when the calf ropers shake out their loops in the branding pen or the rodeo ring, in Texas or almost anywhere else in America north of the Border, when the steer ropers throw their trips or swing for head and heels, it's at least dollars to doughnuts their ropes will be three strand, hard twist manila.

More than three strands in a rope, by the way, may add smoothness and roundness, but detract from liveliness and durability. The Mexicans twist the most beautifully round, smooth magueys from six strands, but these ropes are not the most desirable for either service or fancy work.

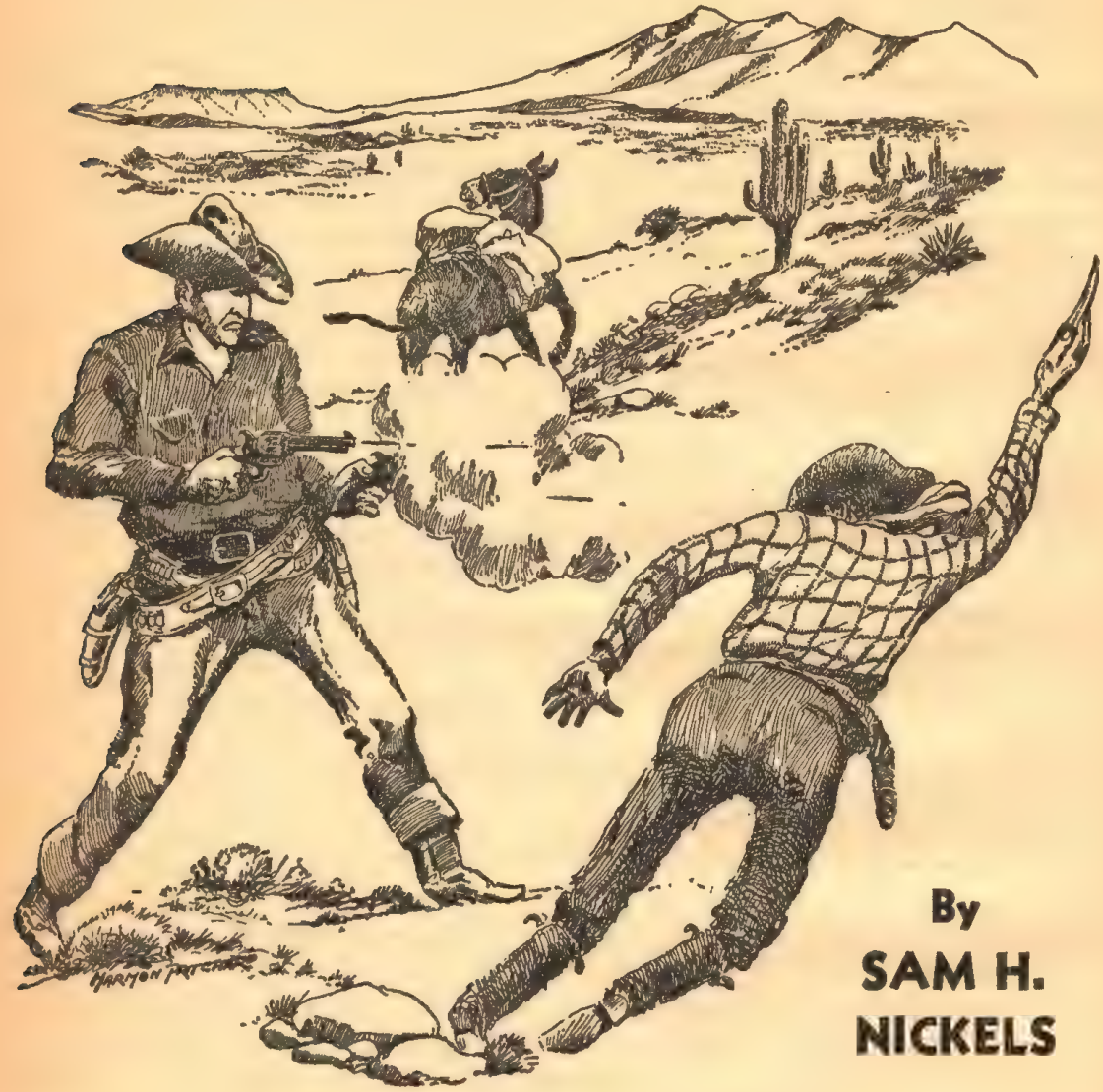
As for lariat lengths, there is no standard. Spot cord spinning ropes may be from fifteen feet to fifty. The early Texas cowboys, starting with rawhides around forty-five to fifty feet long, shortened their hemp ropes for brush work to thirty or thirty-five. Plains cowboys sometimes use forty-foot ropes, but not frequently.

Contest calf ropers stick close around thirty feet; steer ropers ordinarily employ about five more feet of cordage. Mexican magueys of the better quality for skilled work run around fifty-five to sixty feet, with a few seventy footers for the most accomplished Charros. This latter length is said to be commonly used by the South American gauchos.

Lariat diameters also vary widely, though almost always kept between three-eighths to seven-sixteenths of an inch. The latter is most popular among manila rope cowboys, and is considered strong enough for any range or rodeo work. Three-eighths, and the smallest size, termed "scant three-eighths," make fine little ropes for light stock. The three-eighths size in the new linen ropes really is strong enough for any normal use, but habit causes many cowboys to use the heavier seven-sixteenths.

Mexican magueys and spot cord spinning ropes are usually close to three-eighths of an inch in diameter, though the former often are of slightly smaller caliber. The old rawhides, of course, had no closely predetermined size, but were mostly somewhat larger than one-half inch when stretched.

COLT against BOWIE



By
SAM H.
NICKELS

With the rim of his floppy Stetson pulled low over his squinted eyes, little Shorty Casper stood in front of his dingy tent and glared through the dancing heat waves at the low line of rocky hills that loomed dimly far in the distance.

"Blast it!" he muttered angrily. "Maybe I kin make it, but it'll be an awful trip with no more than what I've got to drink. I ought to have had more sense than to let myself git so low on water. I've got about a quart left, an' it's got to last me an' thet danged burro clear to them hills. I may git there . . . an' I may not."

It would be all of thirty miles to that distant water-hole, and Shorty dreaded the trip. He had been there before, and he knew exactly what to expect.

There was no sign of a trail through those hummocks of wind-blown sand that were piled high behind every outcropping ledge of rock, and around every stunted mesquite, catclaw, and thorny bush,

Grumbling, Shorty grabbed up his pack saddle and cinched it on his long-eared burro. This done, he hurriedly lashed all his canteens and water kegs in place on the patient beast.

Shorty had just taken an extra hitch with the end of his pack rope when a gun suddenly thundered from straight behind him and a whizzing bullet slashed through a canteen within an inch of his face. Before he knew what had happened another bullet fanned his cheek and a third burned a stinging groove along the back of one of the burro's long ears.

With a frantic bray, the doleful looking animal kicked up its heels and went bucking away behind the tent, shedding kegs and canteens in every direction.

Hands stabbing to his holsters, Shorty threw himself aside and ducked. As he pivoted quickly around, he saw a thin wisp of powder smoke float up into the still air above a ledge a short distance beyond the tent and threw both his guns to a level.

Bang-bang! Bang! Wham! His and the unknown bushwhacker's weapons bellowed in a staccato roar as he caught a fleeting glimpse of the top of the strange hombre's sombrero behind the ledge.

Ducking and weaving, dodging from side to side to spoil the killer's aim, Shorty fired as fast as his work-calloused trigger fingers could trip Colt hammers. Bullets were cutting the air about him like leaden hail.

Shorty's own slugs were knocking dust and bits of rock from the ledge at every shot as he tried hard to down the ambusher. But he had only the top of the hombre's hat to shoot at.

A slug from the ledge struck Shorty's left-hand gun and sent it spinning fully ten feet away, but he fought gamely on with his other weapon.

Suddenly another whizzing slug ripped the second gun from his grasp and cut a stinging gash along his arm nearly to his elbow.

"Now git them hands up, yuh blasted runt!" came a snarl from the hidden marksman. "Put 'em up an' keep em up, or the next slug goes through yore head."

"Yuh blasted ornery sneak!" Shorty gritted, clutching his arm where the last bullet had creased it. "Come out from behind them rocks an' fight me like a man an' I'll bust yuh in the eye fer this! Whadda yuh want, anyhow?"

With a murderous glare on his unshaven face, a hulking, bull-necked ruffian rose from behind the ledge. With a smoking Colt gripped in each of his hairy hands, he strode angrily forward.

"I'll soon show yuh what I want," he snarled wickedly. "I thought yuh had water in them kegs when I first cut down on yuh, but I see yuh didn't. If them kegs had been full, I'd have just bumped yuh off instid o' shootin' the guns out o' yore hands. As it is, I'm lettin' yuh live long enough to lead me to a water-hole."

Little Shorty's sun-bronzed face twisted in a grimace of waspish satisfaction. The sawed-off cowboy, bullwhacker, hard-rock miner and desert prospector leaned back on his run-down boot heels and nodded his red head sarcastically.

"Yeah!" he rasped, scowling. "So yo're lettin' me live long enough to lead yuh to water, are yuh? Well, accordin' to thet, I'm due to last till we both die of thirst. Yuh skunk, I don't intend to lead yuh nowhere! Savvy?"

With a whining snarl, the ruffian lunged forward. His beefy face mottled with killing rage as he savagely gripped his guns.

"Yuh just think yuh won't lead me to water, yuh blasted runt," he rasped harshly. "I'll soon show yuh whether yuh will or not!"

With a sudden chopping blow of his powerful arm, he struck Shorty a terrific smash with the barrel of his right hand

gun. Shorty tried to duck, but his brutal enemy had taken him unawares.

Slightly dazed, the little desert dweller staggered back and slumped down upon the hot sand. With head ringing and a trickle of crimson staining his cheek, he gritted his teeth and struggled again to his feet.

"Git ready, runt!" the big hombre snarled, drawing back for another blow. "Grab thet jack o' yores an' load them kegs back on it. We're startin' to water right now, an' yo're leadin' the way whether yuh want to or not. Git movin' 'fore I bust yuh again!"

Shorty clenched his fists and glared up at his tormentor as if he meant to tackle him and fight it out to a finish in spite of the fellow's ready guns. He was seething with cold fury and his head was aching terribly from the cowardly blow.

But Shorty was thinking fast, and he caught himself in time. Hurt and unarmed, he would have no chance of beating the fellow. He also knew that the only reason he was still alive was because the fellow had to have water. If his kegs had been filled instead of empty, the ruffian would already have killed him.

But why should the fellow want to kill him? Long used to the ways of the Border, Shorty knew the answer to that instantly. The little red-head had not spent his days in cow camps, lawless mining towns and among the riffraff of the desert for nothing. The fellow was a wanted hombre, an outlaw.

Still thinking swiftly, Shorty flashed him a searching look. Yes, the savage looking ruffian appeared capable of any crime. His heavily notched guns spoke of many killings, and no man keeps a tally of such things unless he is proud of them.

More than likely, the ruffian was wanted somewhere for murder. Even now, a sheriff's posse might be on his trail. Swiftly on top of this, Shorty realized that there was always a reward offered for badly wanted outlaws.

"Waal!" the big hombre roared impatiently. "Yuh aimin' to do as I say, or have I got to make yuh?"

Shorty made up his mind instantly. If there was a reward offered for the fellow, he meant to try to collect it.

Shorty needed money badly. He needed it for grub, and for dynamite to work a small mine he had started a short distance up the gully from his camp.

It was a long hard trip to that far-off water-hole, and he might find some way to capture the fellow before they got there. It was worth trying.

"Waal!" the man bellowed again.

"Wait until I git my burro," Shorty snapped as the fellow drew back to hit him. "Just keep yore shirt on till I git it an' git packed."

With a determined glint in his slitted eyes, Shorty limped around the tent and came back with the big mouse-colored burro. In a few minutes, he had his kegs and canteens as well as some grub lashed tightly in place on its shaggy back.

"Hold on, there, yuh blasted runt!" the big ruffian snarled as Shorty started to drive the burro away down the gully ahead of him. "Hold on! I thought I heard a little water sloshin' in one of them canteens. Hand it over. I'll take charge o' thet. It'll last me to the water-hole."

"Yeah!" Shorty flared angrily. "Last you? How about me an' the burro, yuh mangy skunk?"

The fellow leered brutally. "You an' the jack kin do without," he snapped. "Maybe it'll make yuh hurry faster. Hand me thet canteen!"

Shorty slowly lifted the canteen from the front of the pack saddle where he had hung it. With that small supply of water, the desperado could manage to hold out until they reached the hills, if Shorty allowed him to have it.

Pretending to fumble with the canteen strap, Shorty looked at the ruffian out of the corner of his eye. Working swiftly, he managed to pull out the wooden plug which served as a cork, then he purposely stumbled and dropped the canteen in the sand.

"Look out, there!" bellowed the gunman, leaping forward.

But he was too late. The water had gushed out into the hot sand before he could grab the canteen, and they were now without a drop to drink.

With a howl of fury, the fellow jerked a gun and pointed it at Shorty's head. His thick lips curled back from his tobacco-stained teeth in a deadly snarl as he cocked the weapon.

"Yuh little runt," he gritted, "I'm killin' yuh fer thet trick!"

"Do it, an' yuh'll never find no water, hombre!" Shorty reminded him sharply. "Better do a little thinkin' 'fore yuh pull thet trigger!"

The fellow was just starting to press the trigger, but the mention of water halted him. He had to have water. Without it, he would soon die of thirst. Slowly, face working with fury, he lowered his gun and slammed it into his holster.

"Blast yuh!" he snarled hoarsely. "Just wait till we git to thet water-hole! Yuh'll be payin' fer thet trick, an' believe me yuh'll pay plenty, too! Now start travelin'!"

In spite of his aching head, Shorty grinned waspishly as he led the way. Thirty miles without a drop to drink, and over scorching sand into which they would sink to their ankles at almost every step.

Driving his old burro in front of him, he led the way at a swift gait, hoping in this way to tire the big ruffian out as quickly as possible. Wise in the ways of the desert, Shorty meant to use every means within his power to overcome the hulking gunman before he led him to the water-hole.

Straight on through the deepest sand or over the roughest rocks, Shorty led the way. In the sand, he walked with the waddling tread of the desert dweller, taking care to set his feet down square instead of letting his heels strike first. By doing this, he avoided sinking so deep and it kept his leg muscles from tiring so quickly. In the lava beds, he traveled with the sure-footedness of a rock squirrel.

The big desperado behind him was already stumbling and cursing with fury. He floundered heavily through the sand, sinking into it above his ankles at every step. Cat's-claw, mesquite roots and twisted desert growths clutched at his legs and often brought him to his knees. He was unused to such travel.

"Hey, there, blast yuh!" he finally snarled. "Walk slower! Whadda yuh think this is? Yuh think it's a foot race?"

Shorty grinned crookedly. "I thought yuh was in a hurry to git to water," he snapped. "Maybe . . ."

"Shet up!" the hombre cut in savagely. "Try to git funny with me an' I'll gun yuh right here! Walk slower!"

The big ruffian was puffing like a winded buffalo and sweat steamed down his drink-reddened face. His dirty shirt clung stickily to his broad back, and he was cursing in a low whine at almost every step.

Shorty slowed down for a little while, but soon he began speeding up. He was determined to wear the hombre out as quickly as possible. He tried several times to get close to him and snatch one of his holstered guns, but the fellow was watching too closely.

On through greasewood flats, thickets of prickly pear, up dry arroyo beds and across glistening stretches of barren ground where not even a sand lizard was to be seen on account of burning alkali, Shorty purposely led him.

In these places, the stinging dust that billowed up from underfoot kept the big

ruffian coughing and choking as though his laboring lungs would burst. It got in his eyes and down his back where sweat caused it to burn his skin.

Shorty had taken the precaution to pull his bandana up about his own face until only his eyes showed. With his hat brim pulled low on his forehead, he tramped steadily on.

Suddenly the big desperado floundered to a halt. "Say!" he bellowed, panting. "How much further is it to thet blasted water?"

"Plenty far," Shorty snapped. "Yuh'll see it when yuh git there."

"What's thet?" the ruffian roared, grabbing angrily for a gun. "Listen, runt! One more fresh answer like thet an' I'm killin' yuh! Now whar's thet water-hole? Point out the direction!"

Shorty whirled and found himself staring into the muzzle of a cocked .45, but he knew better than to answer the hombre's last question. To have pointed the direction to the water-hole would have meant his instant death. The man would have shot him and gone on.

"Yuh kin put up thet cannon, mister," he snapped calmly. "I ain't tellin' yuh nothin' . . . yit. Shoot an' yuh'll never find water."

The hombre glared. "Thar's ways o' makin' a sawed-off runt like you talk!" he gritted, fingering his gun.

"Yuh might try some of 'em an' see how yuh make out," Shorty snapped back gamely. "But remember this, feller! It's a long way to where we got to go, an' if yuh cripple me yuh'll never see the place. I'll die before I'd tell yuh where it is. Savvy thet?"

With a growled oath, the man slammed his .45 back into his holster and jerked a long-bladed bowie from inside his shirt. He wickedly whetted the razor-like weapon on the palm of his hand, then tried its edge on his thumb nail.

Shorty watched him closely, his slitted eyes riveted inquiringly on the glittering knife. As he wondered what the desperado meant to do, he braced himself for a battle to the death.

The hombre gripped his knife for a moment, then he darted a look toward the burro and muttered an oath. Finally he nodded and twisted his lips in a menacing snarl.

"I'm lettin' yuh git away with thet imperdence this time," he gritted. "I got to have water 'fore I kin settle with yuh. Now git some grub offn thet jack an' cook me somethin' to eat. Maybe thet'll keep me from bein' so thirsty. Hurry up an' git a move on yuh!"

Grumbling, the fellow seated himself on a ledge of rock and kept his hands close to his holstered guns while little Shorty gathered sticks of dry mesquite, cactus and ocotillo for a fire. The outlaw had shoved the bowie in the top of his right-hand boot.

"Be shore yuh git only stuff thet's good an' dry fer thet fire, blast yuh!" he warned. "No green wood! Savvy?"

Shorty looked at him keenly. He knew now as well as if the desperado had told him that he expected pursuit, and that he did not want to risk the tell-tale smoke of green wood.

Shorty scowled knowingly as he touched a match to the bits of brush. He then untied a bag of bacon and cold biscuits from the burro's pack saddle.

Shorty waited patiently until the tinder-like twigs and sticks burned down to a bed of glowing coals, then he pulled the chunk of bacon from the bag. As he did so, he thought he heard a faint rustle of paper behind him.

Moving around as if reaching for his frying pan, he managed to glance at the big hombre from under the down-pulled brim of his sombrero. He was just in time to see the fellow unfold a small square of paper and spread it on one knee.

Shorty instantly knew what that paper

was, but he pretended not to have noticed it. Rising carelessly to his feet, he went back to the burro as if to get something else from his pack saddle.

As he fumbled among his canteens, he looked warily down from the corner of his eye at the paper on the fellow's knee. Tugging as if trying to loosen his pack rope, he read:

> WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE—
> REWARD TO THE PERSON
> BRINGING IN THE BODY
> OF KILLER MURPHY.

Beneath this was a rough picture that Shorty instantly recognized. It was a likeness of the big man who sat there before him.

Little Shorty's wizened face hardened grimly. There was more to that want notice, but he had seen enough.

As thought of that reward flashed through his head, Shorty's eyes narrowed. If he could down the man, it would mean money to develop the mine he had opened.

He was thinking swiftly as he clumped back to the fire and hunkered down beside it. A sudden crafty gleam flashed into his eyes as he again picked up the chunk of bacon.

"Mister, I'll need a knife to slice this stuff with," he said. "Yuh might reach me thet bowie of yores."

With a muttered oath, Killer Murphy crushed the want bill in his big hand and glared. Leering sarcastically, he crammed the paper in his shirt pocket and stood up.

"Yeah!" he rasped. "I reckon yuh would admire to git yore hands on this knife, wouldn't yuh? Gimme thet bacon! I'll do what slickin' is done around here. Yuh might be one o' these here fancy knife throwers fer all I know."

Shorty was, and if Killer Murphy had only allowed the little fellow to get possession of the knife he would have quickly found it out. A whizzing blade is hardly as fast as a bullet, but is fully as deadly.

It is seldom that a white man can equal a Mexican in the use of a bowie, but Shorty was one of the few who could. It is true that he would never make use of such a weapon except as a last resort to save his own life, but use one he could if it ever became necessary.

Shorty often practiced with a knife to pass away time when he was lonesome. He could pin a fly to the trunk of a mesquite almost unerringly, and he could split the head of a rattlesnake at a few steps with almost as much ease as with a six-shooter.

Shorty grinned sarcastically as he tossed the chunk of bacon to Killer Murphy. He would have given much to have gotten possession of that heavy bladed bowie.

As he stood waiting for the fellow to slice the bacon into thin strips, his keen eyes were searching the desert on all sides as far as he could see. Suddenly he jerked his hat brim still lower.

For a full minute he stared at a faint cloud of dust which he could barely see a few miles to the west of him. His eyes narrowed sharply. Some one was causing that dust to boil up into the still air. He could not see them as yet, but he knew that some rider was passing out there.

"Hyar's yore bacon, runt," Murphy growled, shoving the bowie back in his boot. "Hurry an' cook it so's we kin git on."

Shorty tossed the strips of bacon into his frying pan and set it on the fire. While it sizzled, he sat watching that moving cloud of dust. He was now certain it was a rider, perhaps several of them.

He was also watching Killer Murphy from the corner of his eye. Presently he saw the ruffian stretch himself lazily on the sand where he could rest his blistered feet.

Shorty watched him for a moment, then he turned back to his cooking. He was

thinking rapidly as he turned the bacon over with a slender stick.

He knew that he had to attract the attention of those riders out there. It was most likely a posse. That dust cloud was too large to be caused by one man.

As Shorty glanced again at Murphy, he gave a sudden start. The bowie had slipped from the gunman's boot and lay glittering in the sand.

Shorty's first thought was to make a quick spring and snatch the knife, but he instantly realized that this would never do. Murphy's guns would bark before he could ever hope to get his hands on the weapon. No, he had to get him to move back away from it.

The dust cloud seemed to be moving nearer. Shorty had two problems to solve. First, to attract the attention of those riders, secondly, to get possession of that knife.

Reaching warily behind him, Shorty began slowly breaking off handful after handful of the leafy greasewood. He worked carefully until he had a small pile of the green brush beside him.

Now to get Murphy away from his knife. An unexpected shot would do that, and probably help attract the attention of those riders at the same time.

Shorty warily pulled a handful of cartridges from his gun belt. With a cautious glance at the ruffian, he leaned forward as if to see about the sizzling bacon.

Instantly he dropped the cartridges into the fire. As he did so, he snatched the green greasewood, hurled it in the thickest of the blaze and bounded up with a loud yell.

"Look out, hombre!" he shouted. "Some of my cartridges went into the fire!"

Bang-bang-bang! Bram! Cra-c-k! As though a dozen gunmen were shooting, the cartridges began to explode, hurling fire and ashes in every direction while a dense cloud of smoke from the burning greasewood boiled up into the still air.

With a startled howl, Killer Murphy bounded to his feet. Hands clawing at his holstered guns, he landed a dozen steps away.

"Yuh blasted runt!" he bellowed, throwing his heavy .45's to a level. "Yuh flung them ca'tridges in thet fire on purpose, an' I'm killin' yuh fer it! Take thet!"

Bang-bang! Br-a-m! Crash! Just as Murphy started to pull the triggers, more cartridges exploded in the fire, and the bullets meant for Shorty's red head missed by inches as the ruffian dodged away from the shower of flying ashes.

Like a flash, Shorty leaped for the bowie. But before he could reach it, Killer Murphy again had him covered.

"Thought yuh could knife me, did yuh?" the outlaw bellowed. "Waal, yuh wasn't fast enough, yuh sorrel-topped runt. This time I'm killin' yuh! I'll take my chances on follerin' that jack o' yores to water. I'm bettin' he knows the way. I'm countin' three, then I'm gunnin' yuh so's yuh'll die slow fer workin' thet trick on me. Here goes!"

To have reached for the knife at his feet would hasten the first bullet from those ready guns, and Shorty knew it. He could never hope to reach the long-bladed weapon and make his throw before those black-barreled Colts would rip hot lead through his body.

"I'm startin' to count, runt," Murphy snarled. "I'm countin' three. At three, I fire. *One!*"

Gritting his teeth, Shorty braced himself. He darted a quick look out at that moving dust cloud, then down at the knife.

"Two!" Murphy shouted, and he tightened his grip on his guns.

Shorty crouched and stiffened. With eyes dancing, he watched Murphy's trigger fingers like a cougar about to spring.

"Three!" Murphy bellowed.

Bang-bang! Shorty ducked as a pair of bullets split the air above his red head,

and he snatched the knife as three more cartridges exploded in the fire.

Leaping back as another pair of bullets from Murphy's blazing guns tore up spurts of sand beside him, he balanced the knife and crouched.

As he threw himself aside at the next roar of the outlaw's bucking guns, his arm whipped up and back.

A bullet creased Shorty's scalp and another split his shirt across his shoulder as he sent the heavy bowie whizzing through the air like a thing alive. Out on his feet, Shorty took one tottering step and pitched over in the sand.

When Shorty began to come to himself, he heard the sound of voices and the snort of a horse. When he realized that cool water was being poured on his throbbing head, he slowly opened his eyes and tried to rise on one elbow.

"Hold still, young feller," someone chuckled beside him. "Wait ontil I tie up thet head o' yores. Dang it, if thet bullet o' Killer Murphy's had gone just about a half inch lower, yore brains would have been scattered all over this desert."

As Shorty shook his head to clear it, he saw a sheriff's badge glittering on the front of the man's faded shirt. Blinking dazedly, he tried to turn and look for Killer Murphy.

"D-did I git him?" he managed to stammer. "It was Killer Murphy. Did I . . ."

"I'll say yuh got him!" the sheriff interrupted, grinning. "Murphy wouldn't be no deader if yuh'd blowed him up with dynamite. Yuh throwed thet bowie plumb through his throat. He . . ."

"Yeah," a deputy chuckled from beside them, "an' yuh just won yoreself a two-thousand-dollar reward fer doin' it, young feller. Thet jasper was the most wanted hombre in the state of Arizona. We heard the guns poppin' an' come on the run when we seen yore smoke."

Shorty grinned crookedly. "I kin shore use thet reward money," he replied. "I'd been plannin' on it ever since I found who thet hombre was. Yeah, but there's one thing I'm needin' worse than money right now, an' thet's a drink of water. Somebody reach me a canteen. My throat feels like I'd swallered a cactus burr without peelin' it."

DEATH VALLEY

By

RALPH CONDON

Hell Started Popping When Clay Long, Seeking Revenge For His Brother's Death, Rode Down The Chisholm Trail

The scent of water reached the longhorn herd just as it struck the break in the Red Mesa rim. Clay Long, their young owner, swung wide from his point position to watch the eight hundred go sliding and bawling down to water on One Mile River.

A flank rider showed through the rolling dust and Montana Winters rode up spitting dirt and oaths. But there was a grin of satisfaction on his face as he grunted, "Well, there they are. Two days without water and never lost a head."

Clay Long shifted restlessly in the saddle and a smoldering light showed in the depths of his range-narrowed eyes. "Yes," he agreed and his voice sounded thin. "I've got it in my mind that this'll be it."

Montana looked up quizzically from the smoke he was building but something in the set of the young drover's jaw held back his words and he cocked one leg up over the saddle horn to wait.

When the last of the herd had gone down through the cut, Dry Camp Smith crossed over from the other flank and Tex Dardy came up from behind to rein in beside Montana Winters. For a long moment no word was spoken. Finally Dry Camp said to no one in particular:

"It wouldn't amaze me none if that was One Mile River down yonder."

Tex Dardy let his eye linger on Clay Long for the time it took to shift his tobacco from one cheek to the other, before he lifted a shaggy brow and agreed with a note of discovery. "Why sure enough, that's One Mile River."

"Pretty, ain't it?" Montana said idly. Like the other two, his eyes were watchfully on the young trail boss.

For a little it seemed that Clay had not heard. Then he swung abruptly around to face the three hard-bitten men of his crew, the lines of purpose on his face wiping away every sign of youthfulness.

"Yes," he said in a curiously strained tone, "yes, that's One Mile River . . . and I reckon you boys think it's about time to cut you into my play?"

With these words, the sham was dropped instantly from the three and Montana said gravely, "Well, don't you think it's about time, son?"

Clay flung a hand toward the herd below, "I guess you've got it figured that getting them critters through to market was a damn small part of this trip up the trail?"

"We couldn't help but notice that you was kind of slow and noisy and short-handed," Montana admitted drily, "but we figured to let you bring it out in your own time."

"I've kept silent," Clay said, "because I didn't know myself what I was looking for. I still don't know. But as much as I've ever been sure of anything, I know that whatever it is, it's hell on earth and that it's waiting for us down in the valley yonder."

Tex Dardy spat owlishly and watched him from the narrowed slits of his hard, faded old eyes. "Go on, kid," he said gruffly. "Get it said!"

"All right," Clay said harshly, "a little better than a year ago, my brother Ben started up the Chisholm trail with three thousand head of steers and a strong outfit. You all know that . . . and you know also that he disappeared into thin air—that neither he nor his men nor his cows ever got through to market. The year before, two cowmen from our home range went the same way, both with strong outfits . . ."

When he paused, the three riders before him said nothing but waited grimly for him to go on. Even the horses seemed to feel the tenseness and were still.

"I come up the trail, riding alone like a saddle tramp," Clay went on grimly. "I boozed in every saloon and spun lies and listened to more over a hundred camp fires and I never found but one thing—that all three of the herds had passed by Desolation Wells and were never seen again . . . that some way and for some reason, they all left the Chisholm trail between there and the Barking Dog water."

"Nobody remembered their direction," Dry Camp suggested softly.

"Nobody that would talk," Clay said. "A hundred other herds had rolled by to blind their tracks before I came."

There was a moment of waiting still, then Montana asked:

"Was the Barking Dog water dry when they come through?"

"No," Clay said, and the strain of excitement had thinned his voice. "Everybody said there'd been plenty of water there. I made sure of that point. But it was the last damn thing I could learn. So

I went back home, kicked together this bunch of beef and started up short-handed —easy pickings for longriders. But we haven't been bothered."

"No," Tex Dardy said very softly, "we ain't been bothered. On the other hand we've been helped and advised. Only five days ago an Indian went out of his way to advise us that the water at Barking Dog was dry and that we'd better swing around this way . . ."

Clay Long's lips drew so tight that his teeth showed a little when he said, "And it just happened that his warning come at Desolation Wells. I happened to know that Barking Dog's got plenty of water this year."

Following the sharp force of his words there was a moment of silence. Montana Winters blew a long ribbon of smoke from his nose, Dry Camp scratched the lobe of his ear with a thoughtful forefinger and after a while Dardy asked softly:

"How many hands did your brother have in his outfit?"

"Sixteen."

Montana rubbed out the fire of his cigarette and whistled a bar of *Yankee Doodle* and Dry Camp left off his scratching to point at Clay Long. "That guy Long is as crazy as a pet coon!" he said as though the young drover were not there.

"Crazy," Tex Dardy grunted, "I wouldn't care if he was just crazy. But he's foolish into the bargain. My God, here he comes raring into something that's showed itself strong enough to wipe out an outfit of sixteen tough men, and he wants to buck it with nothing but three old mavericks to back him."

"And to make the whole thing comfortable," Dry Camp pointed out, "he don't even know what's going to leap on him!"

Clay swept the three men with a hard eye before he said stiffly, "Well, I'll put it this way, boys. We've got the herd far enough for me to think I've come up with the thing I'm hunting. You don't owe me anything, and I've got no license to ask you to head into something you can't see to fight. I ain't blaming you none if you ride out of this."

For a long, long moment there was utter silence. Montana opened his mouth to speak but closed it again with a snap.

"Listen," Dry Camp said at last, "listen . . ."

"You shut up," Tex Dardy said and his voice shook with fury. "You shut up, Dry Camp, and leave me tell him!" He swung around to the young drover then and exploded: "Now you look here, you scatter-brained, hair-triggered tag end of nothing, it's high time you learned to grow up and get big and not insult folks that're a whole damn lot better than you'll ever be! You say words about us riding out of this . . . why damn your shriveled, dried up little soul, what the hell do you think we come with you for!

"Do you think we didn't know what this haywire drive was about? Do you think we ain't been watching and waiting and hoping for trouble the whole way up? Why you crazy pup, we was running cows with your brother Ben when you couldn't pull on your own pants! Are you crazy enough damn fool not to know that you couldn't hire or fire or get rid of any of us? Ride out of it . . . ! Why you . . ."

"You didn't use the word 'squirt', Tex," observed Winters in the stillness that followed. "If I'd been telling him, I'd have used that once, anyway."

A slow grin spread across Clay Long's face to wipe away the hardness and bring back for an instant the youth that belonged there. "Gents," he cried, "I stand corrected, and when this thing has played itself out, I'll sure stand for the drinks."

"I guess it was just a passing spell," Dry Camp told the other two owlishly, "I guess he's all right now."

A gleam showed in Tex Dardy's eye as he slapped the handle of the big single-

action gun at his thigh. "Then let's ramble down to the unlikely looking little wart of a town down yonder and see if we can get this thing started to moving."

But Clay Long shook his head grimly. "You know a lot better than that, Tex. To get us all bunched up in a corner at once is just about what folks would want. No sir, you boys dangle down along with the stock and stay out right in the open where nobody can get close to you. I'll drift over to that thing they call a town and have me a look at circumstances and the citizenry. If there's trouble here, they'll be waiting to get us all together without warning and they'll not bother me alone."

Dardy swore in disgust but the wisdom was too plain for argument. Without further words, the four drovers started down into the little valley of One Mile River.

Clay left the others when they struck the level ground, riding away through the cottonwoods toward the handful of unpainted shacks that were bunched around the big spring where the stream took its source.

In front of the largest of these and the only one which showed signs of habitation, four saddled horses were hitched and two men sat on the narrow porch playing mumble-the-peg. They gave no single word or sign of greeting as Clay rode up and swung down. But he remarked, "Howdy, gents," as he went up the steps.

He had just reached the top when the door before him was suddenly filled with the flying figure of a lank youth, who groped vainly for his balance, then sprawled across the porch and down into the dirt of the yard. He scrambled to his feet and clawed furiously at an empty holster.

"I ought to slap your teeth out," a huge, raw-boned man said harshly from the doorway. ". . . a kid coming in here making threats at me!"

The boy in the street shook with helpless rage, "Damn you, Hunter, I ain't through yet! You ain't going to rob us blind."

"You've had your hat-rack steers on my grass and water for three weeks," the big man in the doorway said harshly, "and you'll pay me a grazing fee before you move a hoof out of this valley."

"Sure we been here three weeks," the boy cried. "We been here because you've run off or killed our Indian riders and we can't move on! You dirty robber . . ."

With a single bound, the big man was upon him. A smashing left snapped the boy's head back and a terrific right sent him spinning into the dirt, as a rider came around the corner of the building.

The newcomer gave a cry of alarm and flung down from the saddle. Clay Long saw that it was a girl. She looked up with blazing eyes from beside the fallen youth, and every line of her showed sharply beautiful in spite of the boy's overalls she wore.

"You rotten coward," she cried. "You ought to be killed!"

"You shut your magpie mouth," Hunter roared, "or I'll give you some of the same! I won't stand for . . ."

The look of contemptuous disbelief that had been shining in Clay's eyes faded away and he moved forward easily on the balls of his feet. "Now don't that beat all," he said softly, "now don't that beat all? Here I been thinking all this was an act . . ."

Hunter swung around to face him, conscious of his presence for the first time. The young drover's iron-hard right caught him across the side of the face in an open handed blow that broke the skin and sent him staggering back on his heels.

With a bellow of rage, the man went for his gun. Clay caught him by the shoulder, spun him around, and struck again. The jar of the blow sent the weapon flying to explode in air.

The cowboy caught Hunter by the front

of his shirt and jerked him around to form a shield between himself and the mumble-the-peg players whose hands had dropped to their guns.

"This likely won't teach you a thing," Clay said harshly, "but it's a real pleasure to do it." He held the man upright and struck him again and again, struck him until his head flopped helplessly and his eyes bulged from their sockets. Then with a final blow, he let the man fall, whipping out his Colt to cover the two men on the edge of the porch.

"Does either of you outcasts of a weasel litter want to take up where your partner left off?" he demanded flatly.

"I been watching 'em," a voice said drily from behind Clay. "I been watching 'em and I don't think they'd care to."

The young drover slipped his gun into its sheath as he spun around. There was a grin on his face as he saw the nonchalant Dry Camp Smith slouched against the corner of the building cleaning his fingernails with the well-thumbed hammer of an enormous six-shooter.

"What is that thing you was slapping?" Dry Camp said and jerked one shaggy brow at the sprawled Hunter. "It don't smell as good as a skunk, and I can see from here that it ain't a he-coon."

"It ain't much," Clay said, "it ain't much at all. Are the other boys with the beef?"

Dry Camp nodded. "Yeah, they stayed with the outfit. But I didn't come up about this." He indicated the group in the yard with contempt. "I just rode up to tell you that there's an awful big dust come across the rim and started down the valley. Looks like horses under saddle, maybe ten, fifteen."

The grin vanished from Clay's face and his eyes were hard as ice. "Ten or fifteen? Listen . . ." But the girl cut off his words and there was a world of relief in her tone.

"It's all right. It's the cavalry. I saw a whole troop cross the rim just when I started down after Dan. We sent for help."

At mention of troopers, Hunter rolled over and got painfully to his feet. "You and I ain't through yet," he told the drover hoarsely. "I'll settle with you if it's the last thing I do."

Clay pointed a long finger at him and said flatly, "You go over and sit down with your fellow skunks or there'll be some more settling done right now. I reckon your little reign of terror is over for right now."

The man obeyed sullenly. A moment later, eight blue uniformed troopers and their officer rode from the cottonwoods and into the yard.

The leader ordered the troop to halt, spoke some word to the man behind him, and came forward alone. No change of expression marked his hard, restless eyes as they probed the group, noted the youth whom Hunter had knocked down, the battered man himself and the watchful Clay. He tipped his hat to the girl.

"Lieutenant Cox at your service, ma'am."

"I'm Anne Logan. This is my brother Dan," said the girl.

Young Dan Logan got to his feet then and rubbed a dusty hand across his battered lips. "The army looks mighty good to us," he said, his voice hoarse with fury and humiliation. "That skunk there either killed or run off our riders and has been trying to rob us . . ."

"That's a lie!" Hunter cried, springing up. "I never bothered 'em none. I just told 'em they'd either have to move on or pay me a grazing fee. Then that young whipper-snapper come in here trying to gun me and I throwed him out . . ."

"All right," the cavalryman stopped him shortly, "we'll go into your land patent rights later. There'll be no stock moved out of this valley until I've checked 'em over. There've been some ugly rumors come out of this territory!"

"It won't take long to see ours," the girl told him quickly. "Most of them aren't branded but . . ."

For the first time, the straight line of Cox's lips broke in a smile. "I guess we can give you an order to move without much trouble, Miss. It's just that some law is moving into this country." He swung around to Clay Long and the smile was gone from his face. "Is that your herd down the river?"

"My name's Long," Clay said gravely, "and the critters down yonder all wear the Cross L of my brand."

"How many?"

"Close to eight hundred."

"How many riders you got?" the man's questions were sharp and concise.

"There's four of us."

"How far you brought them?"

"Texas, on the upper San Saba."

A hard light showed in the man's eyes. "That's a long way to push so big a herd with only four men."

"We made out all right so far," Clay answered. "And our herd ain't any bigger than it was when we started."

"I wasn't hinting that it was," the officer said stiffly, "but I've got my orders to check all herds and trail crews in this territory."

"Sure," Clay agreed, "we'll be here for a day or so anyway, resting the outfit. You can go over 'em any time and you'll find no smudged brands. There ain't been an iron touch a hide since we left the San Saba."

Cox appraised the position of the sun with one quick look and spun around. "Corporal Linsay!" he barked. When the second in command came forward, he ordered briefly: "Take four men and make the usual inspection of the stock and riders down the river."

"Three riders with the stock, sir?" Linsay asked. Clay said briefly:

"Dry Camp, you'd better ride with 'em to make the number right, and tell the boys to show 'em around."

Dry Camp Smith licked down the paper on the smoke he had been rolling and said without looking up, "You'd better come along yourself. They're your cows."

Clay Long discerned fine-edged urgency in the old puncher's voice but he didn't look up.

"I'll linger here for a little," the young drover said evenly, "I've got a proposition to make to the Logans here."

The cavalry leader shifted his quick, probing glance from Dry Camp to Clay and said shortly, "It's not necessary that either of you go."

"I'm headed back anyway," Dry Camp said without interest, and turned away to get the horse he had left behind the building.

Clay swung around to the girl and her brother. "My idea was this. It's getting pretty late to be so high in the mountains, and if you've got no riders you might want to throw in with us the rest of the way to the railhead."

Quick gratitude fired the girl's eyes but she shook her head. "You're very kind, but we couldn't ask that."

Hunter stood by the steps, his face swollen and bloody and his small red eyes fixed with hatred on the three. "We ain't settled our score yet," he said harshly.

"You wait your time," Cox told him briefly, "I'll go into your claims."

The party of five, with Corporal Linsay at their head, were ready to leave when Dry Camp Smith rode back around the corner of the building, reined in close to Clay Long and fumbled through his pockets. After a little he said peevishly:

"Now where the hell did I put that list? The cook wanted some stuff—some of it was onions—but I'll be damned if I can remember what else he wanted."

He searched through his shirt a second time and tried both the front and back

pockets of his jeans without avail before he gave a grunt of remembrance and pulled off his hat to take out a folded slip of paper.

"Montana wants this stuff for the grub sacks." He handed the paper to Clay, wheeled his horse and rode away after the five troopers.

There was a little moment of silence while Clay Long put the paper away. Hunter stood on the lower step of the porch watching Dry Camp's departing back. There was something wolfish in his eyes and in the hunched strain of his body. Then Cox spoke and broke the spell.

"I'll take a look at those land patents now."

Anne Logan and her brother followed the cavalryman up across the porch and Clay Long fell in behind them. As he entered the wide, low room of the trading post, Hunter swung around toward him and said harshly:

"Who asked you into my place? By . . ."

Cox had paused just inside the door to let Clay go by. His voice held a curious flat ring as he said:

"Oh shut up, Hunter. You asking for trouble?"

The sudden shadows of the two hard-faced mumble-the-peg players loomed in the doorway.

Then in the second that Clay's muscles bunched for action, there sounded one short, blasting roar of gunfire from down the river. The young drover knew in a flash what it was that had wiped out his brother and an outfit of sixteen tough men.

From the tail of his eye he saw the two men just outside swing around for a look down the valley. Cox's hand flashed down to his gun. So the cavalryman was in cahoots with Turner and his bunch!

With every ounce of his power, Clay Long flung himself backward and down. His shoulders hit the floor in a sliding smash as he jerked his gun free, and a mighty kick with both feet sent the door crashing shut in the faces of the two who had turned to come in.

Cox fired high the first time but his second shot sent the gun spinning from the young drover's hand and the third seared through the flesh over his ribs as Clay sprang up and at him.

Across the room, Hunter jerked a sawed-off shotgun from beneath the bar and whipped it to his shoulder. But Clay Long got in under Cox's fire in time to sweep the man into the air and around so that the full both barrels of buckshot caught him between the shoulder blades. The impact sent both men crashing to the rough boards.

The fall half stunned Clay and for an instant he couldn't move. Then he heard two quick shots and a strangled, gasping cry that he knew to be Hunter's. He rolled free in time to see the man pitch down. Dan Logan had fired with Hunter's own gun, which he grabbed from the floor.

Feet were pounding on the porch and a hoarse voice bawled out a furious oath and command.

Clay's head spun wildly as he got to his feet. The pain in his side cut into him like a hot knife as he ran across toward the bar, pausing only to seize the white-faced girl and drag her with him.

"You get back there and lay out flat!" he cried, snatching the sawed-off shotgun as young Logan slammed two more shots through the glass of a window where a head showed.

The girl hesitated in obeying and Clay picked her up and eased her over the bar. But even then she didn't lie down as he told her. Instead she dived down and came up with a box half full of buckshot loads for the shotgun.

"Good girl," the drover roared. With one hand he ripped off his cartridge belt and slung it across to Dan; with the other,

he broke open the shotgun and jammed new loads into the breach.

Then the blue of a cavalryman's uniform showed at a side window and the belching flame of two horse-pistols came crashing into the room. The mirror behind the bar shattered and went splintering down. Even in the split second that Clay was thumbing back the hammers of the sawed-off, he noted the crazy, jig-saw puzzle of it before it gave way.

Dan Logan fired a rolling volley through the door which had been flung open again. Clay blasted with deadly care through the window where guns were flaming, until he silenced them. He then directed his fire at the running figure of one of the mumble-the-peg players who was fanning the hammer of a six-gun.

The pain in the cowboy's side pulled him down to his knees, but Anne Logan came to his side to pass him shells for a re-load. Her brother sprang across the room to kick the door shut and run the heavy bolt into place.

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the final rattle and choke of a dying man outside a bullet-torn window.

Concern clouded the girl's eyes when she saw the blood soaking through Clay Long's shirt.

"Steady now," he told her, forcing a smile, "I ain't carved up enough so that I ain't all right and there's no hurry about patching this scratch. Right now we got to be ready for the big rush. We didn't get more than a couple, which still leaves seven or eight."

"We'll whip 'em," cried Dan Logan, charged with the wine of first victory, "let 'em come! Sis, you get back out of shooting's way!"

But Clay Long knew better. Two men —and one of those slowed down by a bullet wound—could never hold out against eight men.

"Listen," he said tersely, "our best chance would be to try for the horses before those others get back from down the river."

The boy jumped instantly to the idea in his rush of enthusiasm. But Anne saw the intense pain in Clay's eyes when he stood up, and shook her head.

"Do you expect us to leave you here?"

"Me? Why say . . ." But Clay Long read in her eyes that she was not to be fooled and he said simply: "Well, what's the good of it the other way? They'll get the whole bunch if we stay here and I think I might be able to do enough shooting to break you two in the clear."

"I think you're just swell," the girl told him, and for the first time since he had seen her, her face broke into a real smile. "But I guess you wouldn't think much of Dan and me, if we ran out on you."

"Say," the boy cried, seeing for the first time that the drover was hurt, "you get that loco notion out of your head. We'll lick them tramps right here! Let's see how many guns we can find and load up for action."

The boy started across the room toward the store counter but Clay's hand forced him back. "Wait a bit. That gun rack is in plain view from across the street, and they'll be watching it sure as all hell. Until things thicken up, we'll have to do with the guns we've got and that one of Cox's there."

Young Dan crawled across the floor to get the weapon and handed Clay's own gun back to him. "You better take this and the shotgun both. My hands ain't busted up none and I can load awful fast!"

The drover grinned at Anne Logan and said:

"That kid brother of yours is a fire-eatin' little maverick."

Pleasure showed in the boy's face, but it gave way to a frown as he whispered, "I can see some of them blue devils ridin'

back up across the river. We better get set!"

A steady hammering fire broke out from the cottonwoods beyond the yard. Bullets ripped and whined with regularity, but Clay knew that those who were shooting were merely keeping them cornered and away from the windows until their henchmen could get into position for the final rush.

"I'm going to have me a peek from that crack over by the door," he told Dan gravely. "You stay here with your sister. Maybe I can spot the play and we can figure something."

Flat on his belly, every inch a burning agony in his side, the drover made his way around the counter and across the floor. He peered out.

The guns that were hammering the building were marked plainly by rising swirls of smoke. There were two of them spread out at wide angles to cover the windows and still leave a wide lane for the charge of the three horsemen who were thundering up from behind them.

Swiftly Clay weighed the force of this attack. Three horsemen coming up under the cover of these guns. That left two more of Linsay's party to come in from the other side, and in all probability another hidden gun to cover them from the back of the building.

The blue-coated riders were close in on the riflemen and Clay could see that their guns were out. With an oath he lurched to his feet, swept back the bar on the door, wrenched it open a crack and sprang out.

The smash of gunfire rose to a wild crashing roar, then died suddenly to be replaced by a whoop of victory as three racing horsemen came thundering on through the cottonwoods. Two rifles had been stilled behind them.

Then Clay Long understood. In spite of the burning fury of his side, he added his own yell of triumph to those of Dry Camp, Montana Winters and Tex Dardy who came slamming up and flung down from the saddles.

"You was asking for hell," Dry Camp roared, "and you got it!" His gleaming eye fell on the red of Clay's blood-stained clothes and his voice was thick with sudden concern. "My Gawd, boy, are you bad done in?"

"Just got the hide scratched up some," Clay said, "but I figured you fellows would be buzzard bait by now."

Clay heard running footsteps and turned to see Anne Logan come and say ruefully to the three riders:

"What are you standing talking for? Can't you see he's hurt?"

An abashed look came into Dry Camp's eyes. "Well now, ma'am, you see . . . well as long as he warn't horizontal . . ."

The girl spun around to her brother. "Dan, get a bucket of water and whatever else they have in there. We'll dress this wound here."

Clay Long yielded to her order and sat down. "You fellows had better take off them blue coats before you have to go off somewhere to war," he said, "and you might tell me when you found out this troop was a fake."

Dry Camp Smith paused in his unbuttoning to stare incredulously. "You mean that you never read the note I handed you?" he demanded. "You mean that after all the pains I went to you never even read it?"

"I never had time," Clay protested. "Things happened kind of sudden after you left."

"Well, shucks!" Dry Camp said. "I'd have thought that anybody would have seen this officer fella was a phony. Here he went calling himself a lieutenant and he had on the uniform of a captain! Now you try and remember a time when you seen a army officer demote himself! Sonny, I was in the army once . . ."

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In This Corner—Kid Steve

By HENRY F. CHURCH

Inspector Kelsey Finds Himself on a Murder Case That Promises—Only Promises—to be Hushed Up by Pull

IT WAS strange, thought Inspector Joseph Kelsey, that, given two men, identical as to feature, from hawk-like profile to closely cropped black hair, he should like the dead man best.

The man stretched on the library floor was neatly clad in blue serge; the man who sat, with bowed head, in a nearby chair, was attired in baggy tweeds. The fact that he, himself, was a neat dresser might have influenced him, Kelsey thought, and he studied the two more closely. After keen observation he decided that there was a shade more character in the face of the dead one. Not willing to admit that he was a creature of impulse, this discovery made the inspector feel better.

"Your twin brother, Captain Grest?" asked Kelsey, not that he didn't know, but because it was his business to ask questions.

"Unfortunately, yes," admitted the man in the chair, after a long moment of silence. "I hadn't seen him in years, until tonight, when I found him at work on my wall safe. He drew on me and I shot him in self defense."

"Too bad," said the inspector in polite sympathy, but to himself he made the silent reservation that, in spite of his bowed head, the captain was taking the matter rather coolly for one who had just bumped off his brother. Being a blunt man he put a blunt question.

"Rather a black sheep, wasn't he, Captain? Seems that I recall that he fought as a professional lightweight, for a while—not that that was against him—and then he got mixed up with the law, and did a stretch. Your father, I believe, disinherited him."

"Correct. He made, and squandered, considerable money in the ring; he served five years for robbery; and my father went to his grave in shame."

"And you got the money, and the girl he was engaged to marry," said the inspector, but he said it to himself. He was well posted on the affairs of the family of Grest. Keeping well posted was also part of his business.

FRAMED, on the library wall, was a group of service medals, among them that of a pistol expert. The inspector noted this and wondered, why, if he were so good with a gat, the captain hadn't merely stopped his brother, instead of killing him. As if he divined the inspector's thoughts, the captain answered the unspoken question.

"It was his own fault. He drew on me. I had a right to kill him!" said Grest doggedly.

The inspector started to answer, "Yes, if you wanted to," but checked himself.

There was a humidor on the captain's desk, and from it Kelsey took a cigar and struck light to it. A vague hunch was knocking at his brain pan, and a smoke would help him to develop it. He always thought clearer with a cigar between his teeth.

"Were you alone?" he asked the captain.

"Practically. My wife is in Europe, and the few servants, which we have, are off for the evening—that is, with the exception, I believe, of my man—er—er——"

"Meadows?"

The captain smiled faintly, a tolerant mask to a cold intolerant face. "No. Not this time. This one is named Clark."

"I'd like to meet him. If he isn't named Meadows he must be something new in the way of butlers," said the inspector dryly. "However, I'll get around to him later. Tell me what happened, Captain."

"I hardly know. It happened so quickly. I had been reading the market reports, and, I suppose, I dozed off. I was awakened by a metallic click, and, upon glancing around the back of my chair, saw a man working at my wall safe. I challenged him, and he whirled and covered me with his pistol. I was unarmed, but I tackled him, and, in the scuffle which followed, I secured the gun and let him have it. You can imagine my horror when I discovered that I had killed my twin brother, Stephen!"

The inspector glanced down at the newspaper which lay on the floor beside the captain's chair. It bore the date of the previous day. Had he been interested in the trend of the market, as was apparently the captain, he thought he'd prefer his reports current. He kept the thought to himself, and asked, "Then, what did you do?"

"I immediately called in the police. The body has not been touched."

"Good work," said Kelsey. "Had you failed in the one and muddled the other, neither the police nor the coroner would have liked it. Did you make any phone calls?"

"One only. I called Police Commissioner Gayland, and acquainted him with the matter."

"Why?"

"Nervous, I suppose. Beside, Gayland is a close friend."

"And a confirmed bungler," commented Kelsey, but again to himself. Aloud he said, "Call in your butler, please."

"I've rung for him, several times, and he dosen't answer. I can't imagine why."

"Where does he sleep?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know," said the captain, a touch of boredom in his tone. "When I want him I press his button, but I've never traced the wires to their source. I suppose that he hangs out somewhere on the third floor. There are thirty-odd rooms in the house."

"O.K.," said the inspector, ignoring the snobbish reply. He beckoned to a plain-clothes man stationed at the library door. "Go up to the third floor, Pat, and bring me a man named Clark. Get going." Having met the situation he turned a specu-

lative eye on a decanter setting close at hand.

"Drink?" asked the captain, sensing the pause.

"Why not? It's legal."

"Pardon me. Clark usually attends to such things. There's scotch and soda on the stand beside you. Will you excuse me if I fail to join you? I seldom use it except in a social way."

"O.K., by me," laughed the inspector. "I'm rather an unsociable cuss, myself."

KELSEY poured himself a drink. The hunch had now gained admittance and was mapping out his course for him. "There's more to this than appears on the surface," the hunch was telling him. "You're dealing with a smooth one. Watch your step!"

The captain glanced over at the blue smoke that curled from the perfecto in Kelsey's hand, and was reminded to light one for himself. "Like that cigar?" he asked in a tone which seemed, to the inspector, to be a bit too casual.

"It will do," replied the inspector, "although, personally, I like stogies. When I smoke I don't want to be soothed. I want to be stimulated." That ought to hold him, thought Kelsey, and turned his attention to his drink.

"I don't recall meeting you before, Inspector," yawned Grest who, now, seemed to have completely recovered from the shock of finding himself a homicide. "Strange, too, because I've met a number of Commissioner Gayland's young men. Nice fellows—in the majority."

"I'm just a glorified dick," replied the inspector easily. "Came up from the ranks. Went into the work because I liked it. Stayed on for the same reason. One meets so many charming people, y'know?"

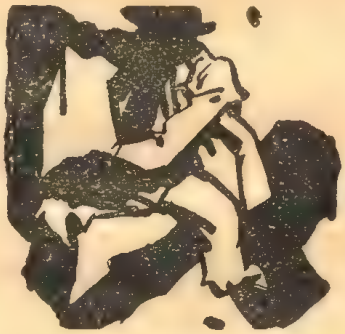
Again the captain displayed his faint smile. "I'm glad that you like the work. I suppose it does have possibilities for a man who can hold his job long enough to reap them. Merit, I suppose, is essential, but sometimes a word from one close to the man higher up might be helpful, eh, Inspector?"

"Depends upon the man higher up. Thinking of helping me along, Captain?"

Grest reddened. "Well, since you put it so bluntly, perhaps I could. I make it a point to help those who try to help me."

"Spill it."

"You're subtle, Inspector. You know that was my twin brother the moment that you looked at him. You were even able to rattle the family skeleton. I had hoped that you would not notice the strong resemblance and force me into an acknowledgment. Frankly—and I see that it is good policy to be frank with you—I sent for Gayland to hush up the matter, as far as our kinship was concerned. It's bad



enough to have unwittingly killed my own brother, without having it bandied around in the tabloids. I might add that I helped Gayland to get his commissionership. Perhaps, as his subordinate, you will be willing to forget that you recognized my brother."

"I've forgotten many a thing, in my line of work, when my sympathies were aroused," said Kelsey, and his cigar took an upward tilt as his lower jaw protruded, "but my sympathies are influenced, solely, by the facts involved—not by politics."

"Tactical blunder," said the captain. He got up and went to the wall safe, and, without further comment, rested his hand significantly upon the dial.

"Wrong again," informed Kelsey.

"Oh, come now, Inspector——"

"You can cut the man-to-man stuff, also," Kelsey told him, setting his unfin-

ished drink on the desk and laying his partly consumed cigar on a nearby ash tray. "Put your approach in reverse, the next time you get in a jam, Captain," Kelsey continued, apparently without rancor. "Don't turn on the heat until you've sounded out your adversary's reaction to reason. I'm going to write that report as an honest official should write it, and, if it will ease you to know it, I'm going to turn it over to the commissioner. I hear him wheezing out in the hall. He must have come in a hurry."

THE commissioner entered. Massive, with florid face and graying hair, he looked the typical wardheeler, having been just that before political favor had elevated him.

"I got your message, John," he puffed. "What happened?"

Grest took him aside and a low toned conversation ensued, after which the commissioner called over the inspector and gave his mandate.

"Captain Grest has, unfortunately, killed his brother in an attempted burglary. Report it as such, and call the man John Doe—if you must name him. I'll wait and see the coroner. I'll also handle the story with the press. That's all."

"I've sent Coogan up to find the butler," said Kelsey, his mouth hard. "I thought ——"

"To hell with the butler! The case is closed. Call Coogan and start moving. Wait—send Coogan in here, and you wait outside. I want to talk to him."

Out in the hall Kelsey met the detective leading the man he had been sent to find. A bump, the size of a walnut, decorated the butler's brow, and there was a dazed look in his eyes.

"Find him unconscious?" asked Kelsey, examining the moist lump.

"Naw. He objected to being waked up, and I slapped him down. The guy knows something!"

"Turn him loose, and go in and see the commissioner. The case is closed."

Coogan's brow wrinkled in a puzzled frown, but he did as he was told. When he rejoined the inspector, who awaited him in the police car, the latter asked, "who was the dead man?"

"Search me," said Coogan, "I never heard tell of him!" He stepped viciously on the gas.

NEXT morning, when Inspector Kelsey entered his office, Lane, his secretary, got up from his typewriter and stood smartly at attention.

"Morning, Chief," he greeted with the pleasant familiarity of a good subordinate sure of his ground. 'We've got the making of a big day. First, Man-mountain Gayland says for you to get the hell over to his office the moment you pop in here; Contes and Contes were robbed of a hundred grand worth of jewels, and want to know what's the matter with this department; three dames, outside, say they were insulted in that red light raid you ordered; and Coogan is cooling his heels with an English earl, who has got a noble shanty on his brow; and oh, yes——"

"That's enough for a start," said Kelsey, spinning his soft felt across the room to come to rest, neatly, on a corner hat rack. "Turn the jewel robbery over to Roberts and Braham—if they're not already on it; send some good-looking dick out to calm the ladies, and if they don't calm lock 'em up for disorderly conduct; let Gayland fry, until he calls again; and send Coogan in with that butler."

"I said an English earl, Chief."

"O.K. Send Coogan and the earl in."

"I thought that I told you that this case was closed," growled the inspector, as the lantern-jawed Coogan, crested like a cockatoo with the honest red hair of Ireland, came in with his man.

"On the books—yes; but between me and you—no. I told you last night that this guy knows something."

"You'll never make a good cop, Coogan," said the inspector with a frown. "You've

got too much sense. Where did you find him?"

"He was out walking the dog and I nabbed him as a suspicious character." Coogan pointed to a dejected-looking Airedale, which had followed them in.

Kelsey loved dogs. He snapped his fingers to the animal and made friendly whistling sounds through his teeth, but the dog ignored him with fine canine dignity. Coogan announced, by way of introduction, that it was the captain's dog, but even that did not break down the reserve of the creature.

"Airedales are one-man dogs," said the inspector, and desisted from his advances. "What have you to say for yourself, fellow?" he asked, turning to the anxious butler. "Walking the dog, without police sanction, is a serious offense in this country; but we'll overlook that if you'll give us the lowdown on what happened last night."

"I don't know, sir. You see, the marster—that is, Captain Grest, sir—permitted me to retire early. Said he would take a bite at 'is club, and perhaps go to the cinema. I laid out 'is blue serge, and sat 'is scotch and soda to hand. Then I retired, and slept soundly until this here bobbie routed me out!"

"Yes. Doubtless you were all tuckered, after that routine. Would your master, by any chance, go to his club or the movies, in tweeds?"

"Indeed not, sir. Not in the evening!"

"He was so dressed, last night."

"Then 'e changed 'is mind, sir, and stayed in."

"Remember that fashion note, Coogan, and don't wear your tweeds to the cinema, or the club. Go on, Meadows."

"The name's Harrow, sir."

"Spelled with an A or an H?"

"Han Hay, sir. Never with han 'Aitch!"

"That doesn't sound like Clark, to me."

"Ho no, sir. It's Harrow."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"I was sleeping on the third floor, back, and there's——"

"—thirty-odd rooms in the house. Quite an establishment. You didn't hear the shot. Did you know the dead man?"

NATURALLY not, sir. According to the morning papers he was supposed to be a Portuguese seafaring man. I wouldn't be expected to know the type, sir. Incidentally, if I may be permitted to say so, the papers made quite a hero out of the marster!"

"Quite!" snorted the inspector. He thought that the commissioner and the coroner must have labored far into the night to think up that story. He returned to his questioning. "What happened after I left?"

"Why, I returned immediately to my room; bathed my forehead; took an aspirin; and went back to bed."

"You mean that you didn't even see the body?"

"Indeed no, sir. The marster did not invite me in and when I got up this morning, it was gone. So was the marster—to 'is club, I fancy. I sent the rug to the cleaner, and, since the marster was not there to take Rex for 'is morning stroll, I took 'im, myself. The poor begger's nerves were all shot and he was howling about the house. Later, this here bobbie took the both of us!"

"Mr. Coogan must have told you about the killing, after he—er—awoke you. It would seem to me that your natural curiosity would have drawn you to the scene of the shooting."

"In service one is supposed not to have curiosity," replied the butler, with dignity.

Further questioning developed that the man had been in the employment of Captain Grest for two years, and that he had never met the captain's brother, who, so he understood, had died abroad.

"That's all," said the inspector. "Try and locate Captain Grest, on the phone, and tell him to hop over here and identify you." His hunch was now riding high, wide and handsome. The next move was to get the captain here in person.

The butler was saved the trouble of telephoning his plight, by the irate arrival of the commissioner, accompanied by Grest, yet clad in tweeds.

"Why the hell didn't you come a-hopping, when I sent for you, Kelsey?" exploded the commissioner. "There's a limit to my patience!"

"Was just shoving off when you came in," soothed Kelsey. He noticed that Grest, upon entering, had not acknowledged, by any sign, the presence of his butler or the dog. What impressed him more was that the dog, now stretched with its long muzzle buried between its tawny paws, paid the captain no attention, whatsoever.

"Clark, here, and the dog were worried about the absence of the captain, and dropped in to make inquiry," lied Kelsey, offering cigars to the new arrivals. The commissioner took one, but Grest declined the proffered weed.

"Oh, yes, Clark—to be sure. Very thoughtful of you, Clark," said the captain, turning a poker face upon his employee.

"I suppose that I should have left word that I had gone to the club for the night. You may go now."

"That's a fine beast you have there," remarked Kelsey. "Had him long?"

Grest, for the first time, noticed the dog. "Oh, yes, old Rex—to be sure. He's all of that. I've had him for years," he answered, and, advancing toward the animal, reached to stroke its back. With a vicious growl the creature snapped at him and left bleeding welts on the fingers of his right hand.

WITHOUT comment the inspector went to a wall cabinet, and, taking out a bottle of iodine, applied some to the scratches. His cold blue eyes questioned the man.

"Most unusual," said the captain. "Never knew the begger to turn on me!" He laughed nervously, and it was plain to see that the incident had upset him. "Take him home, and tie him up," he directed his servant.

"Kelsey," rumbled the commissioner, when, with Grest, they were closeted alone, "the captain dropped in this morning to thank the departmeent for the sensible way in which it handled his case. He was afraid that, in his confusion last night, he might have riled you—not that I couldn't keep your trap shut, m'lad, by orders—but we've done him a good turn and he appreciates it. The captain feels that you are a man of intelligence, but what about that clown, Coogan? Will he talk?"

"I doubt it, but he's Irish and shouldn't be threatened. Which reminds me, Captain. You rubbed your dog's hair the wrong way. Maybe that accounts for his bad humor."

The commissioner loosed a hearty roar of laughter. "You're a smooth one, Kelsey," he rumbled. "We get you! Make the lad a sergeant, and impress upon him that rising officials keep their traps closed. Now just among ourselves. John, here, is an old, personal friend. I knew his father before him, and him and his brother when they were brats. A favor to him is a favor to me. What job have *you* got your eye on?"

"Yours," said Kelsey.

"Humph!" grunted the commissioner.

The captain laughed. "Tom," he said, getting to his feet, "we have here an unusual specimen of the genus gendarmerie—a man in love with his job for the job's sake! As for the commissioner," he remarked, turning to Kelsey, "he's pretty well rooted—politically—and I dare say has shown some merit of his own. He's good on the job for a long time yet. How-

ever, drop in on me some time under more pleasant circumstances, and the three of us will knock off a high ball to the future commissioner. Gentlemen, I leave it with you. As the commissioner knows, I'm sailing in the morning for Europe."

GAYLAND saw the captain to the door, and it was evident to the inspector that he was anxious for the man's favor. When the door had closed after Grest, the commissioner reached up and nearly jerked the closed transom from its fastenings. "Why the hell don't you get some ventilation in this cubby hole?" he growled. "I nearly get apoplexy every time I come here, what with your damned stogies!" He resumed his seat and helped himself to another of the offending cigars. Noticing that he was already smoking, he placed it in his pocket. "Damned fine man —Grest," he commented. "Only this morning he ordered a bang up funeral for his blackguard brother. Couldn't own him, of course, but he arranged to put him away decently."

"I suppose, Commissioner," said Kelsey, casually, although he knew that he was setting off a verbal bomb, "that if I were really a good cop I would have arrested him for the murder of John Grest, when the captain's dog nailed him. But it will take more proof than that."

"What the hell are you talking about?" roared Gayland, leaping to his feet. "Why, John Grest just walked out of here!"

"No. That was Stephen Grest."

"Why, man, you're insane!"

"Genius leans to insanity," replied the inspector blandly. "Now, calm yourself, Commissioner. I admit that I'm playing a hunch, but the supporting data are convincing. You saw Grest's dog bite him, and that dog was an Airedale—a one-man dog. He is an old dog, and probably remembered Steve Grest, unpleasantly, from other days. The butler's name is Arrow—pronounced Harrow—and he has worked for Grest for two years, yet, last night, when I asked Grest, he didn't know where the man was quartered. He referred to him as Clark, and confirmed that name a few minutes ago. When he came in here he showed no recognition of either man or dog, until I called his attention to them."

"That was a natural mistake," fumed the commissioner. "His former butler was named Clark. Any one can forget names. I forget 'em, often." Despite the commissioner's protest, Kelsey saw that he was impressed.

"You know every voter and his dog by their first names," laughed Kelsey, resorting to blarney. "But, seriously, here's a vital point. This butler—who doubles as valet and dog walker—claims that he laid out a blue serge suit for his master, yet we found the captain clad in tweeds, while it was the dead man who had on blue serge."

"So what?"

"I'll draw a diagram," said the inspector patiently. "Steve Grest had a grudge. John Grest got his girl and his inheritance. As Steve Grest he had nothing to look forward to but disgrace and poverty. As John Grest he would have everything that Steve had lost. Ergo, the logical thing was for him to become John Grest. Nature, at birth, had made that possible. He had only to study up on the current affairs of his brother; await an opportune time; remove John; change identity with him; and collect. The plot, with variations, has been worked ragged by hack writers. Like all would-be super-crooks, however, Steve failed to catch up all of the loose ends. The butler and the dog raveled out on him."

"The whole idea's screwy," growled the commissioner. "I was with him several hours, last night, and he talked of things that Steve Grest couldn't have possibly known about."

"For instance, that item of fifteen thousand dollars that John Grest contributed, anonymously, to your campaign fund?"

"Why, yes—say, how in the hell did you know about that?"

"Just picked it up—like Steve could have, if he were interested." Kelsey smiled at Gayland's embarrassment. "Don't

worry, Commissioner," he said. "We've got Steve's fingerprints over in Identification. He went up under the name of George Waltham."

"I had 'em pulled out of the files, last month, as a special favor to Captain Grest," confessed the commissioner, gloomily.

KELSEY'S eyes narrowed. He would have liked to lace into the commissioner, but the latter's humbleness stayed him. "It was probably Steve, representing himself as the captain, who got them from you," he stated. "However, we file also with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That's our ace in the hole."

The commissioner's florid face brightened. "I've got it!" he thundered triumphantly. "John Grest was in the army during the war. The War Department would have his fingerprints. I'll telegraph for a photostat, and then I'll get an imprint —some way—from Grest. That'll settle it!"

Kelsey rang for Lane and dictated two telegrams. "The classifications can be wired back immediately," he told the commissioner. "Before a photostat could reach here our man would be in Europe. I suppose he will meet Mrs. Grest there?" The inspector deliberately laid the last as a bait. It had immediate effect.

"Good God!" roared Gayland, thumping the desk. "I hadn't thought of that. Why, if this man is really Steve Grest, and, after murdering her husband, he passes himself off to Mary Grest—" Words failed him, and he appeared to be in imminent danger from apoplexy. "What can we do, Joe?" he finally asked.

"Nothing to arouse his suspicion that we question his identity. Let's go over to the undertaker's and have a look at the corpse. If John Grest had any identifying marks, they should be known to you."

"He had a shrapnel nick on the left shoulder, but it's too late now!"

"Buried?"

"Cremated."

"The lad's thorough," said Kelsey admiringly. "Well, that stymies us. Next move, on your part, is to get a look at Grest's shoulder, and see if it carries such a scar. Step on it!"

"You must think I'm working for you," grouched the commissioner, reaching for his hat. "But God help you, Kelsey, if your fool hunch turns out to be a dud, and you get me in dutch with the captain, I'll break you, so help me!"

LATER, Kelsey received answers to his telegrams. The Department of Justice had no record of George Waltham, neither were the fingerprints of Captain John Grest in the files of the War Department. The inspector was not surprised. He summoned Coogan. "Pat," he said, when his subordinate was before him, "you move in pretty low circles. Did you ever see Steve Grest fight as a lightweight?"

"I used to see him in plenty bouts, if that's what you mean. He started out as a college flash, and ended up in Maxie Bauer's stable. He waded through a flock of set-ups and push-overs, till the boxing commission got wise to him and he had to go up against some real boys, and that was the end of Kid Steve."

"Kid Steve was his fighting moniker?"

"It was his ring name," said the exact Coogan, with a curl of his lip.

"Now that dead man, last night. Did you recognize him as Kid Steve?"

"Sure. I've seen him kissing the canvas too often not to recognize him in that position."

"Did he have any tin ears, or other ring markings?"

"Naw. He liked his pan."

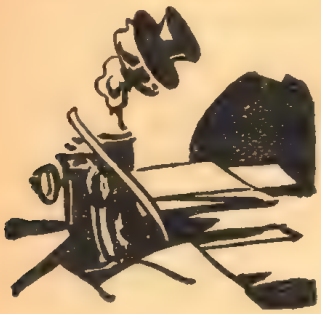
"How did he act in the ring?"

"Aw, he liked himself plenty. Always come bounding over the ropes, instead of through 'em. Danced in his corner, and nearly pulled down the posts, flexing his muscles. Always shook hands with himself—pug fashion. Great kid for shaking hands with himself. You know the kind of lug I mean."

"I think that I get the picture," said

Kelsey. "Run me over to see the commissioner."

Arrived at the office of the commissioner, Kelsey found him fuming. "You and your damned detective novel ideas got me in a fine jam!" was his greeting. "He's John Grest, all right, and I'll swear to it. He heard every word we said, right over your



damned transom. He was waiting for me, with the proof, and was he mad!"

"He showed you the scar?"

"He did. That's evidence, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. Any quack could have put it there. Did he show you the fingerprints of Steve, that you so accommodatingly pulled from our files?

"He—er—said he destroyed them. Most natural thing that he would."

"Then, naturally, he wasn't able to compare his own with them. A comparison of the two would have been most convincing evidence, Commissioner."

"He did just as good. He showed me a photographic copy of his fingerprint record from the War Department. Had it made, one time, as a souvenir. He's willing to come down here and match it with his own fingers."

"That isn't waterproof, either. The records of both men are missing from Washington. It follows, logically, that if they could be got from us, they could be snitched from the government. Given both records a clever commercial photographer could produce a composite. It isn't mere coincidence that all of the records in the case are missing."

"Aw, they got mixed up in the New Deal," argued the commissioner. "Now look here, Kelsey, I had to do a tall piece of begging to keep you on the job. The captain is strong with the administration, and, since you know so much about my personal affairs, you ought to know I can't afford to cross him. Your record is all that saves you for getting me into a mess like this. As it is you've cost me a lot of dough. I owned up the joke was on me, and in order to get him back into a good humor, I promised him to throw a fifty-plate dinner at the Roof tonight—a sort of farewell party—at five dollars a cover, not counting the drinks. That's what you've cost me!"

"Fine. I'll be there," promised Kelsey, and looked at his watch. It was ten minutes of two. "Where does Grest bank?" he asked.

"The South Central, I think. Why?"

"Never mind. I've just got time to get there. See you tonight at the Roof."

"The hell you will! You ain't invited," shouted the commissioner, crimson with rage.

DOWN on the street Kelsey climbed into the waiting police car and told Coogan to open his siren and step on the gas. They arrived at the South Central Bank just as the porter was closing the massive bronze doors.

"How much money have you got, Pat?" the inspector asked.

"I've got my rent money—forty bucks. Why?"

"In service one is supposed not to have curiosity," quoted Kelsey. "Mr. Coogan wants to open a checking account, for forty dollars," he informed the frowning teller who was looking significantly at his watch.

"Tomorrow, would be——"

"—more convenient, but you see Mr. Coogan is sailing on a world cruise tomorrow, and wants to leave his wife and six kids well provided for."

The teller started to reply, glanced at their hard faces and changed his mind. Instead he reached for an application blank, and pressed a button which sounded a

buzzer in the office of one of the numerous vice presidents. That individual came on the double quick, convoyed by three burly bank guards, picked up enroute.

The vice president was not favorably impressed, either. "We require references —" he stalled, but one of the guards volunteered the information that he knew the inspector and the bank official's face was transformed. He became quite eager to accommodate them. He had expected a holdup and was so vastly relieved that he gave them personal attention.

When Coogan had registered his signature, the official produced a little pad saturated with a colorless, gummy substance, and rolled the detective's huge thumb therein. "Press here," he chirped, shoving forward a neat card and instantly the whorls of Coogan's thumb appeared thereon, in black. "Much better than your messy police method," explained the vice president. "Developed for a fastidious clientele."

"I'm sure that our customers would like it also," agreed the inspector. "Can a depositor get hold of his print, once it is taken?"

"Emphatically, no! Our rule is inexorable. Only once have we been approached with such a request, and we firmly refused. One of our most consistent customers—a personal friend of the President—asked, only this morning, to withdraw his thumbprint card, as he was closing his account preparatory to a protracted European trip. He was quite insistent, but we stood by our guns!"

"For unreasonable bull-headedness, that sounds like my old friend, Captain John Grest," said Kelsey, playing a long shot.

"Remarkable!" exploded the vice president. "Truly coincidental."

"What about my rent money?" Coogan wanted to know as they were leaving.

"Pay it by check," instructed the inspector. "You're a bloated capitalist now."

"I don't know what you were after," said Coogan, on the way back, "but I guess you found out what you wanted about them thumbprints. Me, now, I'd have gone straight in and asked 'em what they had in that line. Why beat around the bush?"

"You get to see both sides of the bush. If you'd flashed your badge on that guy, you'd have got small information. He'd have closed up like a clam. Bankers don't like the spotlight. Our business had all the earmarks of a legitimate transaction. He was off-guard, and I found out exactly what I wanted to know. By the way, the commissioner ordered you promoted, today, and we'll celebrate it tonight. Go down to Jake's and rent a tux and charge it to me. We're dining at the Roof. I'll pick you up at your house, at eight. Those are orders, Sergeant."

WHILE Kelsey was putting the finishing touches to his own evening attire, his attractive young wife came into his room and curled up at the foot of his bed.

"Stepping out, tonight, Good Looking?" she inquired.

"Uh-huh."

"Taking me?"

"Not this time, Honey. Stag supper by the commissioner." He attempted to adjust his tie, and she got up and took over the task.

"Here. Let me do it. Your hands are shaking. You're working too hard, Joe. I wish you had a different kind of job."

"We might try raising chickens," laughed Kelsey, "but even that takes money to start with."

"I'd love it. It would be better than being a law widow."

"You may get your wish. This blowout is supposed to be a farewell dinner for a fellow. I may be the fellow. How do I look?"

"Swell," said young Mrs. Kelsey admiringly.

"Yes, sir—I mean yes, ma'am—we may buy a chicken ranch, on time, any day now. I'm forty-two and I've spent twenty years trying to out-guess crooks. I'm getting fed up!"

"It would be grand," said his wife wist-

fully, resting her dark head against the cool expanse of his shirt bosom, "but I know you, Joe. You were born a cop, and you'd go nuts——"

"Nerts, is the more elegant expression."

"—you'd go nerts working at anything else."

"I'm serious, Beth," said Kelsey, cocking his hat at an angle.

"I never know when you really are," sighed his wife.

Later, when Kelsey and Coogan arrived at the Roof, the inspector learned, to his surprise, that no dinner for the commissioner was scheduled. Not to be so easily ditched, Kelsey called up Gayland's secretary and got the young lady out of the tub. She told him that the commissioner was having the feed at Julian's Grill. She was played out, she added, after calling up people for a fifty-plate dinner.

"Fifty-two," corrected Kelsey.

"F-f-f-f-fifty," chattered the secretary, the night being chilly.

"G-g-g-g-get a wrap around you, and phone Julian to make it fifty-two," ordered the inspector, and hung up.

WHEN they arrived the dinner was well under way. The captain was seated to the right of the commissioner, and they were flanked by an assortment of guests that caused Kelsey to smile. Club men and social registerites rubbed elbows with ward aldermen and minor politicans. It was obvious that the commissioner had been forced to go out into the byways to make complete his gathering, but the party was gay and unrestrained, and a good time was being had by all.

The commissioner's secretary had evidently taken her own sweet time about ordering the extra places. A waiter, bearing the necessary china and silverware, was just entering the room. Kelsey signalled to him.

"Set 'em up at the head table," he ordered. "I'm Inspector Kelsey of Scotland Yard, and this is Count de Cooganac."

By dint of much crowding the order was carried out, under the baleful glare of the commissioner. Grest, however, waved them an airy greeting.

"This is the nerts!" beefed Coogan in a low tone, tugging at his collar, which was a size too small. "Wotcha gonna pull this time, Inspector? If you're gonna pinch somebody, why don't you get it over with? I'd like to get out of here."

"Coogan, you grieve me," said Kelsey, also in a low tone. "You bring no imagination to your work. A crack on the jaw, and a bum's rush to a cell, is the scope of your technique. With me now, I appreciate the dramatic potentialities of an apprehension. I achieve an arrest with finesse. Let me ask you a question. Last night you

saw a dead man and a live one in the same room. Which was Steve Grest?"

"The man on the floor, I reckon, but I'd have called either one Steve, if I'd met him on the street."

"Good. If you didn't know that Captain Grest was sitting there with the commissioner, you'd swear that he was Steve?"

"Sure."

"And, if he really were Steve, you'd not know the difference?"

"Nope."

"Well, I'm betting that he *is* Steve Grest."

"Yeah? Why don't you nail him? I'm not as dumb as you sometimes think—or I wouldn't be a sergeant. I get you, now, on that thumbprint. If this guy is Steve Grest, his hitch hiker's tool won't match up at the bank. Is that it?"

"Exactly."

"Then why don't you grab him?"

"Always the direct actionist!" said Kelsey, with a sad shake of his head. "Now suppose that I did grab him, and hold him for comparison with the print at the bank, and it turned out that he wasn't Steve, after all, but the real McCoy, and I made him miss his boat. What then?"

"I'd have a new boss!" said Coogan, light beginning to dawn.

"And you'd be busted back to a common dick, within a week!"

"Aw, now, go cautious-like, Inspector!" pleaded Coogan.

The main course was being served and a waiter poured red wine in their glasses. Kelsey spoke to him. "Here's a two dollar bill. Keep the glass full-up for the gentleman on the right of Commissioner Gayland, and it won't bring you bad luck."

"Sure, Inspector," said the waiter, pocketing the money. As he passed on he managed to crack Coogan smartly on the back of his head with the bottle. It was so obviously not an accident that Kelsey turned a questioning stare upon his companion.

"That's Mike Clancy," grinned Coogan. "He used to be on the force, before his feet went bad."

The commissioner was feeling the effect of his drinks. He was growing jovial, and even condescended to favor Kelsey with a nod. He frowned at Coogan, however, and shook his head violently, as though not quite sure whether he saw aright. Grest, to the satisfaction of the inspector, was downing his wine as fast as the attentive waiter plied him. At the rate that he was going, Kelsey figured, the captain would soon be drunk.

The meal progressed and the party waxed gayer. A quartet composed of an alderman, a famous polo player, the head of a large contracting firm, and a probate judge, attempted to render a current ballad, but received a shower of biscuits for their pains. They went into a huddle, and then repaired to the corridor, there to renew their vocal efforts.

"You are now about to witness the science of psychiatry as applied to the solution of crime," Kelsey told Coogan in a light manner, but the sergeant saw that his jaw was tense, and that his fingers gripped the table until the knuckles of his hands were white.

He's gambling with our jobs, and it takes nerve, thought Coogan, as Kelsey stood up.

THE inspector rapped on his glass for attention. A waiter closed the door against the quartet, and quiet, of a kind, was restored.

"As toastmaster of this joyous occasion—" Kelsey began, but was drowned out with a roar of applause. A biscuit grazed his cheek, but he paid no attention to the compliment. Coogan, his red thatch bristling, was glaring about in an effort to spot the thrower, and Kelsey rested his hand on the sergeant's shoulder to calm him.

"As toastmaster," he resumed, when the applause had died out, "appointed for the occasion by our genial host, that sterling public official, that outstanding citizen, that courageous champion of the people's rights, Thomas Q. Gayland—known affectionately as 'Honest Tom'——" Again he paused, as thunderous applause broke out. This time the uproar continued for a full minute, while the commissioner took bows and dodged biscuits. During the interim, Kelsey looked over at Grest and saw that he was taking no interest in the demonstration, but was addressing himself, solely, to the glass before him. To his consternation Kelsey saw the waiter, Clancy, set down his empty wine bottle, look around for a full one, and, failing to find one, draw a flask of whiskey from his hip pocket. From the flask he proceeded to pour a liberal draft into the captain's glass.

"Good Lord!" groaned Kelsey. "The fool will get him too drunk to work on!" In desperation he rapped again on his glass and recaptured attention.

"We gather here, tonight, friends, to toast an honored guest. A man whose

fighting heart has endeared him to the people of the nation——"

"Hear! Hear!" thundered the commissioner, and shook Grest out of a near-stupor. The clapping and cheering threatened to start anew, but, by supreme effort, Kelsey kept the crowd in leash.

"Save it, friends, save it!" he pleaded, "until I name this man to you. Some of you may have forgotten him—he has been out of the sports picture for some time—but wherever lovers of true sport, devotees of the manly art, protagonists of the squared ring, in brief, the common garden variety of fight fans, are forgathered, the mere mention of his name will bring a hearty response!"

"What the hell!" roared the commissioner, trying to struggle to his feet, but Kelsey sternly waved him down. Coogan, with rare inspiration, dipped his napkin in a glass of ice water, and, walking to the back of the captain, wrapped it about the latter's neck. Grest immediately revived, with a silly smile. He seemed to be grateful for the attention. The inspired Coogan began to fan him with another napkin, snatched from the arm of a passing waiter.

"Get ready, now, folks!" howled Kelsey, working them up for an outburst. "I'm going to name him," then he announced, pointing, dramatically at Grest, "In this corner is Kid Steve, himself, the greatest uncrowned lightweight in the history of modern pugilism! *Give him a hand!*"

Crowd hypnotism, bolstered by strong drink, loosed pandemonium. Even the commissioner, loudly cursing Kelsey for several kinds of fool, automatically was banging his fat hands together. The intimate friends of the captain were shocked speechless, but the bulk of the crowd, gathered there at the urgent invitation of the commissioner, were strangers to the honored guest and they cheered him to the echo.

Kelsey, white and rigid, saw Grest struggle to his feet. The man looked dazed, but a fatuous, egotistical grin was spreading over his lips. Was he about to call the bluff, wondered the inspector, and held his breath. Coogan drew further inspiration. His ham-like hands encircled the waist of the swaying man and held him erect. Relieved of the need of holding himself steady, Grest gazed around with flashing eyes. It was evident that an intoxication, more potent than that derived from liquor, was upon him. Then—slowly—his arms went up over his head; his hands met and clasped, in the familiar salute of the professional prize-fighter. Glory be—he was shaking hands with himself—pug fashion!

Steve Grest's hands dropped to his sides, and, at a nod from the inspector, Coogan gathered them in the encompassing clasp of one huge paw. The crowd did not know that Grest was a prisoner, and he, himself, was too drunk to care. He staggered out between the commissioner and Coogan, looking only like a very tired man with his hands clasped behind him. His trouble would come in the morning when he had to compare the print of his thumb with the little card in the files of the South Central Bank.

"The demonstration was too much for him," Kelsey told the guests. "Go on with the party, and I'll send the commissioner back in." The group of singers in the corridor, now augmented through the recruiting of two negro bus boys, made an opportune entrance, and drew the attention of the crowd. Kelsey left them to the biscuit barrage, and went out.

"That took nerve, son!" admitted the commissioner humbly, wiping the cold perspiration from his brow. Coogan and the ex-policeman, Clancy, had disappeared with the prisoner.

"No, sir," replied Kelsey, entirely serious for once. "It took caution. If I'd had nerve, I would have pinched him this morning and have taken a chance that he was the right man!"

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Adventurers All

DOING THE PAN-AMERICAN HIGHWAY ON FOOT

AMONG the many exciting adventures that I have had in my walk from New York to Buenos Aires, Argentina, the following is one of the most thrilling.

I found myself in a little town named San Juanico, in southern Mexico at the end of a long hard day's walk. I stayed there over night.

In the morning I was faced with an enormous river that had swollen much during the night due to some heavy rains high in the mountains. Several people had crossed it in the early morning on horses, so I thought I could swim it.

All of the small population of the town were standing in groups on the banks watching the crossers. Men who knew the channel were stripped and going back and forth with packs. I figured if they could do it I could too, so, as there were many women and small girls standing in the groups, I walked off about a hundred yards to strip. The other men were not so considerate.

My plan was to tie up my camera in my shirt with my passport and other papers, go across, return and get the rest of my clothing. The river was about four hundred yards across. Well—the first thing I did was go under, ruin the camera and most of my papers. It was very swift and mighty rocky. I hit back for shore, dried out my things as best I could, and cussed.

The Mayor came over on the run and forbade me to try it again. The prospect of waiting for the river to go down was not pleasant, as it was the middle of the rainy season. I put on my clothes and started back on the road. When I got to Tlacalula the river was very wide.

Here I made another unsuccessful attempt to cross and later two horses made it. One carrying a pack got across fine; the other with the man was swept down the river. So I watched the packer. From where I stood it seemed as though the animal went up into the mountains on the other side. Here at Tlacalula I found that by a series of falling downs and getting ups I could manage to get across that river. I carried two large rocks for balance.

I walked down the other side till I was just opposite the first town. Finding the tracks of the pack horse, I followed. Soon the ground got hard and there were no more tracks, but as a good flat river bed led on I continued. After an hour it got narrower.

I kept going up the water course. Rocks kept slipping from under me. When I grabbed onto a bush or small tree for support it was generally full of thorns and I tore my clothing. Then the road ended altogether.

I had started about six in the morning and when I got to the top it was two-thirty.

The course wandered around in all the directions of the compass, and the sky was cloudy. From the top I looked around, and off in the distance I could see the whitewashed towers of a church. At the foot of the mountain was a wide river. I lit out in the direction of the church.

About half way down I came onto a shepherd's hut, but no shepherd. I looked around and found some hard tortillas (Mexican bread) and a small ball of goats' milk cheese. These I took to eat on the way down as I had had nothing all day. When I got to the foot of the mountain I crossed the river and in just twenty minutes was in the town. *It was the same town I had left that morning.*

It was then four o'clock and beginning to rain so I recrossed the river, I felt that if I didn't, it would swell up so badly in the night that I wouldn't get over for perhaps a week. I went back and looked for the tracks of the second horse and found that they got onto a very good road around the base of the mountain and not over it.

Now the question was: Where was I to sleep? About four miles down the path I came onto a bar type gate. After entering I neglected to put the bars back in place and walked down to the house which appeared to be deserted and made myself at home. I found some beans tied up in a bandana and picked out a pot full, broke up some wood and put it in shape for a fire.

I had one match, it was wet and the head came off. What a mess. Just about that time I heard an awful yell and ran out to see what it was all about. A native came barging through the gate and demanded to know what I was doing in his house. I said, "I wanted a place to stay for the night and made myself at home as I was sure you would have done had you been there."

That evidently pleased him. He swelled up like a toad. Then he asked me a curious question. "Are you a son of God?" I said I was and all during this performance he was brandishing a machete which looked as big as a sword. He was as drunk as it is possible to get. He asked me again if I was sure I was a son of God, to which I assured him I was.

His come-back I shall never forget. It was, "Well, I am a son of God, too, so that makes us brothers and brothers don't kill brothers." It started to rain hard, so we went inside. Just a cane thatched hut, no furniture. We sat on the floor and I asked him for a match. I got some water from the river which was mostly mud. He took off his hat and produced some fresh meat he had killed in the hills, some cookies and, best of all, some cigarettes.

I started the fire, scorched the meat, burned the beans, but I had a meal, which though fierce and filthy, was one of the best I have ever had.

John E. White

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